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It Had Been
A Mild, Delicate
Night

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It Had Been
A Mild, Delicate
Night

Heavenly labials in a world of gutturals
Wallace Stevens


TOM KAYE



Abelard-Schuman
LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO

To
Geraldine

One



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CHAPTER ONE

IT HAD BEEN A MILD, DELICATE NIGHT. Traces of it still clung to Jaques as he shuddered with slowly growing consciousness. The insistent nudging of the park bench, the whimpering of the river tugs, the fidgeting of the dead leaves in the morning breeze, at last forced him to open his eyes. Without changing his position, he took in his surroundings; the urchin sparrows, flapping their wings in the dust, the balls of silver paper flicked by coy clerks at passing typists, the overlooked ice cream cartons, even the variegated gravel. Above the ground his inspection was more cursory. He ignored the violent red geraniums, the self-conscious green lawns, the trim trees and other impedimenta of public relaxation. The gleam of a freshly painted litter basket held his curious gaze for a moment, and he reserved its contents for future investigation.

His bedfellows, seduced into some kind of regulation by the symmetry of the benches, he disdained to notice. He wore his rank easily and without effort. And they, the beggars, the street-singers, the pavement-artists, the *bourgeoisie* of the gutter, deferred to his unquestioned prerogative. We, the cripples, mock at the helpless; had they legs, the helpless would dance the *Carmagnole* on the swollen dead.

Hence he had not been disturbed by the rustling of the early wakers. Grimacing as they tasted the sourness

of their morning mouths, they had yet remained silent as they disappeared into Villiers Street, clutching their newspaper bundles. Of those that remained, neither was approachable, and therefore both were non-existent. In the background, aware of his awakeness, they fidgeted, shivering with morning hunger. At last, muttering softly to themselves, they came to their feet and left, leaving Jaques alone in the flower garden.

By this time it was eight-thirty. An open air art exhibition was being held at the other end of the strip of park, and those artists who had slept there overnight, and those that had just arrived, were busy claiming the best sites, hanging their pictures, chattering with hope and apprehension.

There were already a number of early viewers wandering past the stands. Business men, hugging their self-importance in polished briefcases, moved uneasily from picture to picture, avoiding the imperturbable faces of the artists, impressed, despite themselves, by the corduroy atmosphere. The polished seats of their striped trousers moved majestically from side to side.

Two office girls, painted like witch doctors, clove through the groups of bearded men, their cheap-scented conversation shrilling in the air. For them the artists were non-existent, as were their paintings. They had dropped the apparatus of their sex-appeal effortlessly. Their talk, punctuated by stylized jerks of watery laughter, was of cinema shows, knitting and office politics. They moved through the crowd like a piece of grit through the organs of an oyster, wrapped in an envelope of aggressively loud discussion, which moved like a wave from group to group as they passed, and

were ejected at the far gates of the park, immune, pearl-like, serene, leaving a wake of ruffled blood behind them.

As they left the park, their voices tapering off along the embankment, a young woman swung purposefully in. Slim and brown, her neat sophistication clung to her sinuous body. Pleasantly aware of her impact upon the artists, she moved through them slowly, examining such of the paintings as caught her eye, ignoring the deliberate stares, while savouring their mixed appreciation and hostility. She paused two minutes in front of one abstract, the more fully to enjoy the surreptitious glances of a delicately-tinted young man in an orange towel shirt. The nearby artists were impressed, for the painting was recognized among themselves to be the masterpiece of the founder of a well-known art circle, whose scornful abandonment of all the conventional tools of the artist, such as brushes and manufactured colours, had already caused a revolution in the progressive world. The picture was priced at £35,000, the master having been persuaded by his vibrant disciples that his work could only be compared with that of the classical masters. The price was scratched on the back of an envelope, and fixed to the cracked frame with a rusting drawing pin. Every now and then it fluttered in the breeze, frightening a few nearby sparrows.

Reluctantly Faith moved away from the focus of the young man's eyes. His chin and the lobes of his ears were suffused with an orange reflection from his shirt. As she turned, she allowed her glance to rest on his face for a second. His orange turned deeper, he thrust his hands in his pockets, and examined the paintings fiercely. She felt curiously elated at this, and resumed her purposeful step, breathing deeply with satisfaction.

A fervent note was introduced into the babble that welled up in her wake, and she came towards Jaques like a skiff caught in a boisterous wind, with singing in her ears. He had not moved. He had apparently followed her progress through the exhibition, and now, as she bore down on him, he was able to get the fullness of her sensuous movement. As she walked her hips rippled, and her pointed breasts nodded delicately to one another.

She had seen her husband off at Waterloo Station for Bournemouth, where he was attending a medical conference for two days. She would miss his sensitive adoration, his immediate perception and appreciation of the subtle variations she made in her personal adornment, and his exquisite tenderness, but, nevertheless, a sigh of relief whimpered through her as the train glided out, and his pink face disappeared among the signals. She relaxed momentarily. Closing her eyes, she allowed her body to sway to and fro gently, as though she were preparing for some esoteric rite. The attention of his discriminating worship would be all the more delicious for his short absence.

It had been such a fine, cambric morning that she had dismissed the taxi, and walked back across the swelling curve of Waterloo Bridge and through the embankment gardens. The sensual titillation she received from the artists whetted her appetite and augured well for the day. She walked up Whitehall Place and caught an 88 bus back to her Chelsea house.

Jaques sat up and blew a thick viscous stream of straw-coloured spit on to the path. It formed a little dusty puddle, shining in the morning sun. He lurched to his feet and went over to investigate the waste-paper bin.

It apparently yielded nothing, and he stood over it, muttering to himself, and peering at the ground with watery eyes. The nearby art students, in dirtied corduroys and clean linen, eyed him nervously. Only a young Polish refugee noticed the mouldings of his cheek, and her next Christ was Jaques, twisted on the cross. Thus crucified, he turned back towards Villiers Street, his deformed right foot giving to his walk a lurching motion. His progress, being thus both oblique and irregular, gave the appearance of some ingenious piece of machinery, of which the mechanism had rusted in a number of places.

The little group of men drinking tea at the stall watched his erratic approach carefully. One swallowed the last of his tea, and made off. The other two instinctively moved closer together, and their conversation petered out. The stall-owner set a large tin mug of tea on the counter. With a tablespoon that hung by a piece of string from the side of the stall, he stirred it to indicate the presence of sugar.

Jaques arrived at the stall, and stood there a moment, glowering at the stained counter. For a minute he watched the swirling liquid, then picking up the mug by the rim, he moved over to the park railings, and looked into the gardens he had just left. Dust from the dried up beds twitched aimlessly at his feet. The powdered leaves of shrivelled bushes shuddered in the hot breath that rose from the underground station. Like a huge mouth, the station-exit vomited city workers. Every few minutes it retched violently, and a surge of sightless automata was impelled into the stale morning. Their little legs working feverishly, they were borne by impetus up Villiers Street, and spilt into the Strand.

Above, the morning trains rumbled over Hungerford Bridge. The flecks from their smoke made a thick dust on faded Waverley novels on the second-hand booksellers' tables. A little coterie of lawyers' clerks and errand boys, strong in each other's presence, studied the literature in the rubber-shop windows. Instruments to prevent, impede and assist conception dangled before their fascinated eyes. Pornographic art books in shiny black covers, scientific studies of sexual behaviour, and other vital books filled the shelves. Advertisements offered them relief from impotence, a cure for blushing and an adjustable rupture appliance. Behind them the inevitable flotsam of the metropolis drifted, like a constantly changing backcloth. The shop proprietors, sitting behind their windows, were like children at a Christmas treat in a big department store. The model train rattled convincingly enough, and there was a good deal of noise, but the scenery that flashed past the windows was, they knew, only painted. The same scene was repeated, time and time again. Yawning, scratching and biting one's nails were the only realities.

Carefully the two tea-drinkers resumed their conversation.

'So what did Bill do?'

'Bill?' The other cleared his throat thickly, to indicate his opinion. They both glanced at Jaques at the noise, but he had not moved. The throat-clearer continued.

'Bill? 'E's just about got the guts of a rabbit. "All right," 'e says, "you 'ave 'er," 'e says, "I 'aven't got time to waste on 'er." An' 'e swallows 'is beer, an' walks out, soft as a tame mouse. This new fellow looks around as much as to say as 'ow 'e'd give anyone a clip as wanted

it, and then walks out after 'im. Soon as 'e'd gone, they all started in to say as 'ow they wouldn't 'ave stood it, and 'ow they'd 'alf a mind to go and clip 'im one, though I notices none of 'em moves. They just 'aven't got the guts, nowadays, that's the matter with 'em. Like tame mice, the lot.'

He blew on his tea, and sucked a mouthful in.

'What'd you do?' asked the other.

'Me? Wasn't nothing to do with me. Lord bless you, mate, I ain't putting my nose in other people's business.'

He spat to emphasize his point.

'Ow long 'ad Bill known 'er?' asked the stall-owner, interested.

'Long enough, some thought. Recollect 'e was at the Green Man with 'er last Christmas, and 'e'd known 'er some time then.'

'What's she like?' the stall-owner demanded.

'All right,' said the throat-clearer briefly.

'She's all right, all right,' said his companion with emphasis. 'Yellow 'air and tits like b'loons. Reckon I'd know what to do with 'er.'

He smacked his lips, and took a deep gulp out of his mug.

'That's all you can see, 'er tits,' the other said scornfully. 'She's daft, soft in the 'ead, that's what's the matter with 'er.'

'Wouldn't matter to me,' his companion insisted. 'She may be daft, but I've never seen tits like 'ers before.'

'What they like?' asked the stall-owner, leaning over the counter, and resting his chin on his hand. He fixed his eye on the speaker's lips.

'They're big an' round an' soft like fruit. An' when

she walks, they bob up an' down, so nobody can keep 'is mind on 'is beer.'

His eyes glazed reflectively.

The stall-owner nodded, and sucked his teeth appreciatively. The bald patch on his head was reflected in the elaborately ornamented mirror that hung behind him. In it, too, were reflected the tea-drinkers, their moustaches damp with tea-steam, and behind them, Villiers Street, pulsing with morning activity. The spasmodic surging of workers from the underground station continued. In their clothes they showed their different social status from the earlier arrivals, but they swept up the hill with the same machine-like purpose. The grey smoke of prescience hung above them. Neat in chalkstripe suits, their free wills bore them relentlessly on and up into the Strand. Only their pricking eyes testified to their theological misgivings.

'Women only understand one thing,' the stall-owner was saying sententiously, 'an' that's a man as knows 'is own mind. They can't abide messin' about, 'ere a bit, there a bit, will 'e, won't 'e. No, you got to get on with it. Go right in, an' take what you want, an' don't 'esitate. If you 'esitate, you've 'ad it. Women can't stand a man as 'esitates. She wants it all right, but she doesn't want to 'ave to say so. If you 'esitate, she'll 'ave to say one way or the other, and of course she'll 'ave to say the other. No, you got to get on with it, an' no bones about it, an' then you won't get no trouble.'

He took out a red handkerchief, and blew his nose violently to emphasize what he had said.

"E's right there," said the other. He looked at the stall-owner with admiration.

‘That’s all very well, though,’ said the throat-clearer, looking carefully at the grey rim left by the tea in his mug. ‘That’s all very well to talk like that; anyone can talk like that, but when it comes to doing it, then it’s a different matter. It’s easy enough to talk, but just you try it, that’s all.’

‘I know what I’m talkin’ about . . .’ the stall-owner began heavily, but he was interrupted.

‘Anyone would think from listenin’ to you, all you’ve got to do is pick on some fancy bit, follow ’er ’ome, get ’er in the bedroom, and she’ll fall on your neck.’

‘Like enough,’ said his companion.

‘What you don’t seem to realize is, that she’d make such an ’ullabaloo as soon as she saw you followin’ ’er, that you’d get copped before you know where you are. Fine fool you’d look, sittin’ in court, an’ ’andin’ out that stuff about not ’esitatin’.’

‘Well, of course, you’ve got to ’ave the right time and place,’ the stall-owner explained patiently. ‘You can’t just go about after every bit as takes your fancy. That’d be daft. What I says is, when your chance comes you got to get on with it. There she is, go in an’ get on with it, that’s what I says.’

He looked at the two men complacently, with the air of having explained himself fully and adequately.

The companion satisfied himself with a nod, and drank his tea down, as though to clinch the argument. The throat-clearer still looked unconvinced, however, and his sagging red-veined features hung moodily over his tea.

The disembodied conversation came to Jaques like a spirit message to a medium. Through the meagre leaves of the shrubs the kaleidoscopic scene of the outdoor

exhibition could still be seen, the coloured figures moving slowly to and fro as they formed a series of patterns, like a puppet show set up for his amusement. Though the bohemians no doubt prided themselves on the brilliance of their colourings in their dress as well as in their paintings, yet the slovenly living which they affected, as well as the dry dust that was being kicked up by a hundred frayed sandals, gave to both a drab, faded tone. Jaques stared at them from his watery bloodshot eyes without apparent interest. Nor did he seem to betray any concern with the conversation behind him. He was detached from human intercourse, and stood brooding over it, like a gargoyle presiding at a tryst in a fountained court.

In height Jaques was several inches over six feet. This was deceptive, however, for his crippled foot caused him to stoop in his lurching gait. It was only when he stood and pulled himself upright on his good leg, that his full height became apparent. He had a trick, as now, of supporting himself with his elbow, and allowing his damaged leg to hang limply, bent at the knee, and resting on the side of his boot. As it swung gently to and fro, seemingly of its own volition, the abnormality of the foot was emphasized. The ankle joint, instead of allowing a movement forwards, only worked sideways, forcing him to walk on the side of his foot. As it moved slowly from side to side, the joint creaked slightly. At times, when he was making great efforts to walk fast, it would emit loud cracks.

His hair was thick and black, matted and full of grit. Just above the left ear was a large bald white patch, which contrasted strangely with the darkness of his skin. His forehead and cheeks were lined, dusty and grey. He had on the point of each cheek a sudden growth of hair,

like fur that was beginning to spread. His nose was thick and veined; at the tip the pores were enlarged and black. From his nostrils a cluster of hairs protruded. His scabby lips opened to reveal black stumps, and his yellow, blood-shot, twisted eyes discharged continuously into the miniature basins formed by his sagging lower eyelids, so that when he moved, they spilled over, and ran down the side of his nose.

Yet Jaques's face was not malevolent. Nor did it have that questing, sensual preoccupation that characterizes most practical solipsists. It was emotionless, detached, wooden. To the observer, Jaques looking at the embankment garden through the withered shrubbery was Jaques looking across the primeval forests, and the fluttering artists were a flock of river-birds, waiting, unsuspectingly, to be bruised to death.

Suddenly he turned, and lurched over to the stall. The drinkers stopped talking, the words cut short in mid-sentence hanging over them, and gripped their mugs defensively. They watched him bang his cup down on the metal top of the counter, narrowed their eyes as he swayed in front of the stall for a few seconds, seemingly at a loss, and then followed his swaying, jerking figure as it made its way slowly up Villiers Street, pausing every so often to investigate the eddies of rubbish in the gutter, until it turned into the arches and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER TWO

A MASSED GATHERING OF CREAM POTS on Faith's dressing table welcomed her as she sat down, smiling at her with their urbane faces, like servants greeting the master of the house, discreet, obsequious flatterers. They were of different sizes and makes, and their shapes were as varied as a connoisseur's cellar of liqueurs, but each bore an indefinable stamp of good breeding. The design and message of their labels were in perfect taste. Inside the thick shaped pots, moreover, the preparations were curiously similar. Although differing in texture according to their employment, there was yet some quality in their soft touch that made them instantly recognizable, a touch that was both self-effacing and reassuring. This quality of aristocratic assurance was equally characteristic of their odour, which, ostensibly differing from pot to pot, nevertheless was unmistakably common to all. Over and above the gently insistent flavour of the scent was an aromatic chaperone. At the same time, and in contrast with their heavy pots, there was nothing luxurious about these creams. They bore even a faint air of austerity, a consciousness of their task, and a quietly confident appraisal of their capability. They were at once servants and taskmasters, and their measured praise carried an overtone of discipline.

To Faith the regiment of pots was more than a collection of toilet preparations. She was familiar with each

shape, and with the subtle touch of each cream, so that she would have known them all blindfolded. They were like the suitors out of fairy-tales, and she was the princess, who could rely on their undying devotion. From their impeccable sameness she drew a deep feeling of emotional security. Their compliments were never false or strained; the miracle of their worship was always there, unobtrusive, unshakable. Whenever she was disturbed, unsure of herself, depressed, Faith would go to her dressing table, and draw new vigour from it as from the stream of life. Behind the frothy hangings, the delicate crystal drawer handles, the gilt baroque glass, the blue-enamel backed brushes, lay deep reserves of strength, from whose contact she emerged rejuvenated, more beautiful, more royal than ever.

Faith sat down, leaned forward and studied her features carefully. She did not fear the thought of age and the loss of youthful beauty, partly because she half-believed it would not befall her, and partly because she was sure that, with the aid of her suitors, she could defy it. She was twenty-nine, and her expression as she examined her reflection was not that of apprehension, but of curiosity. Familiar as it was, Faith was never tired of studying her face. She was able to trace and watch indefinable changes, changes of emphasis expressed in colour and shadow. These she did not attribute to the passing years, but to some force within her, working out its will in her features, giving character to her beauty. In this force, she felt, lay her strength and the prospect of immortality; it was the essence of her, herself made explicit, and she sought always to discover its direction, and to attune herself to it. Thus, before applying any of her

toilet preparations in the morning, Faith would usually spend some few minutes trying to discern any changes in its manifestation. Such changes as there were from day to day were infinitely subtle, and she was not always able to catch them. On the days that she did, her life and her being were one joyous whole, harmoniously, rhythmically working out their destiny. When she missed the shadowy hints, while not necessarily feeling depressed, she nevertheless missed the serenity of being at one with inevitability. This rarely happened for more than a day. The following morning the trend was made clear to her, and she was able to eradicate her mistake and set herself on the new, correct path.

This morning she felt that she would be successful in her search. She had given herself plenty of time to attend to her make-up, so that she should not strike a false note when she saw David off, but it being warmer than she had expected at that early hour, she had had to change her frock for a blouse, the selection of which had taken so much time that when she came to her dressing table she was only able to follow the trend of the previous day, without being able to make sure that no change had come about during the night. It was not long now before she decided that a change had, in fact, taken place. Her old personality had already become no more than a shell, a slightly grotesque empty mask, an expression without substance, beneath which a new Faith was slowly disclosing herself, with gradual insistence pushing to the surface. The make-up of the early morning emphasized the now dead character, the character of yesterday, and by so doing, accentuated the contrast. Already it was as

though she wore a painted shroud, beneath which her features worked strangely.

Faith hesitated no longer. Deftly she worked cleansing cream into her skin, spreading it over her face and neck with rhythmical circular sweeps of her strong fingers. The cream's touch was cool and sure; it lay like night over her, gently soothing the sharpness that the fresh morning air had brought to her cheeks. Having carefully spread the cream, she let it settle for a moment, relaxing in her chair, with her face half turned towards the light of the window like a blind child. The sun fell on her eyelids. Already she could anticipate the new strength that would surge through her, already she was assuming her new personality. With her eyes still closed, she felt for her bowl of cotton wool balls, with which she wiped off the false expression. She turned towards the glass and opened her eyes. She had not been mistaken. A new Faith was there, looking back at her. Each change of emphasis, delicate and infinitesimal though it was, had disclosed itself as a vital force, inevitably fulfilling itself, pointing the way to a new mode of existence. With mounting excitement she applied fresh cosmetics, tracing out the new personality with subtle decisiveness, emphasizing shadows, heightening colour where it glowed softly. With consummate skill she constructed a mould into which she would grow. Putting her powder puff down at last, she leaned back from the glass to study the effect.

There was no doubt about it. Despite the minuteness of the alterations, she had effected a complete transformation. Deliberately she took in and savoured each individual trend, and then, having done so, allowed her glance to play over the whole reflection, feeling the force of her

new character. It was an aspect of herself she had not known before; there was something curiously different that morning about herself. It was not just the usual slight differentiation in her beauty, it was a completely fresh development, a variation she was not familiar with. For a moment she grew slightly apprehensive, wondering if this was the beginning of the long slope downwards to middle-age, an inchoate picture forming itself within her mind, persistently forcing itself upon her reluctant attention. But the reflection itself soon dispelled that fear. She was glowing with a vitality that became more apparent every moment, a fierce growing force that denied any idea of weakening through age, but was rather a kind of rejuvenation. As she looked upon herself, she felt that joyous apperception of power grow within her, till she was ready to sing out with excitement. The day, golden and unknown, lay ahead of her; she would woo its demure secrets with a fierce bounding passion.

Faith took up one of the blue-backed brushes, and began to brush her hair with it, bending her head to one side as she did so, her eyes fixed on her reflection. Her thoughts lapped against her mind.

David had insisted on wearing his pale grey suit. He was like a child, in some ways, as irresponsible as a child. Her hair glistened, looked darker than ever, glinting in the sunlight. 'Her black hair glinted in the sunlight,' she thought. She could not now see why she had not at once detected the new self which now smiled back at her so confidently. It was fatal to rush these things. She wondered whether David had noticed. He had looked at her a little abstractedly, almost as though he was reluctant, for some reason, to turn his full attention to her, but then

trains and medical conferences were distraction enough, and she had not hidden her opinion of the pale grey suit. 'Quite the right thing for a private view,' she had told him, 'with, possibly, a very pale pink carnation, or even a handkerchief, but not, definitely not, *de rigueur* for a medical conference. To be a success as a doctor, and particularly as a specialist, you can't look too dismal.' But then, as she had really known beforehand, once his mind was made up there was no point in talking. He was, in many ways, as irresponsible as a child.

Why had she not noticed the change at first? Perhaps the powder base was too clogging, it obscured the process. Anything that was too rigid tended to become a shell, an iron mask, clamping her down. 'Cosmetics must live with you,' she thought, and that would be a good advertisement catch-phrase.

It was ten-thirty. At one o'clock, Faith had a luncheon appointment with Henry. Dear Henry! She thought of him with mingled impatience and affection, and brushed her hair across her eyes, like a mermaid. 'But, of course, it should be yellow hair for a mermaid,' she thought, 'yellow hair and a fishtail flopping about. Quite horrid.' But then, she did have the figure for it, and that was a comfort. She would have to receive friends in the bath, she supposed. Henry, dapper, hat and yellow gloves in hand, all eyes, and David fidgeting about in the background. 'But what do you want, darling? Can't you see I'm having a little chat with Henry?'

What should she wear for lunch? Henry was really quite the roué, and she made a mental note to remember to compliment him on the last, delightfully wicked, issue of *Paprika*. She could wear the green candystripe, with

the white china Chelsea earrings, or the navy blue linen, white straw hat, and the long white gloves, though one of them needed mending. There was not time, she decided, for Annette to mend them, with her tiny, careful French stitches. There was the white and gold Grecian frock, but it was rather precious, she thought, for lunch.

She leaned forward and looked with satisfied approval at the shining black waves of hair as they curled back from her brush. 'I might wear it like that, on one side, partially windswept,' she thought. 'Piled up like waves. David would have a fit. Everything must be just so, point device the very man, and then that play about points and gaskins falling.'

The day's promise flowed about her. As she reviewed its prospects, she could feel nothing but delight in her well-being and the well-being of the world in which she moved. The creature before her in the glass smiled superbly back at her imaginings. The benison of her glance warmed Faith as an early morning sun warms dockside shiverers. One could, perhaps, predict too much. Confident in her strength, there was no need to prejudge the events, but rather to let them roll over her unresisting consciousness.

There was, she felt, something of unpremeditated grandeur in her preparation for the day; a hint, almost, of bravado in her refusal to anticipate the working out of her new felicity. She put down her brush, and began to comb her hair into place.

There was the blue and yellow gingham, but that was too adolescent, too *ingénue*-on-the-ranch, for Henry. The light-blue linen was perfectly simple, classic, but it was unexciting, and without verve, and anyway it had shrunk.

One could never tell with Henry, who had exquisite taste, but also blind spots. There was, for instance, that queer Moya girl in black satin, like a tart from Waterloo Station. 'Daphne Moya is definitely one of Henry's blind spots,' thought Faith, 'definitely. What's more, the girl has no figure at all.'

The sunlight illuminated Faith like a stained-glass martyr. The noise of tugs on the river reached her only faintly, as through an ancient memory; long, long ago, motors hooted on the embankment and passing children shouted. But it was only with an effort that she could remember them. She was poised above the day, rapt in her initiation, and she had no time for secular minutiae.

There was the jade green suit she had bought in Canterbury, but it was rather faded. It has been such a successful buy, and David had been in such a temper that day. 'There would almost be something symbolic in wearing it today,' she thought, 'like white at a first wedding.' Though what one wore on the second or third occasion, she had no idea. White was for virginity, but then suppose one was still a virgin. There would, of course, have to be a committee of investigation, the priests and the aunts—Aunt Flora, for instance! Faith smiled involuntarily at the thought. There was also a dove-grey halter-neck, but it had begun to wilt somewhat. And she shrunk from the prospect of wearing her stone-linen suit again.

Faith swayed before her altar, an ecstatic neophyte caught in the morning sunshine. Wrapped in her theological dilemmas, she had no inclination for the more esoteric rites and liturgies of the service. At last, having made her precise communion, she was rewarded with a vision so strong that she nearly cried out. Opening her

wardrobe, she took out a navy-blue dress and quickly put it on. Round her strong slim neck she fastened a curiously severe silver chain. Before the tall cheval glass she stood still. The room closed round her, and filled with quietness. It was eleven o'clock, and the sun pushed thick sticks of light through the window, along which tiny particles of dust floated. 'Here am I,' thought Faith, 'strong in myself, on the edge of an adventure.'

The day unfolded before her like a peacock's tail.

CHAPTER THREE

AS JAQUES CAME INTO WHITEHALL, the children sang for him. Their thin voices, released by the ringing heels of passing government clerks, clapped the air with harmonious movement. Their undifferentiated tombs, side by side, covered the earth from the sun, making a cloister for him to walk on. But Jaques did not concern himself with the choirs of the dead. His interest in their epitaphs lay purely in what might lie on them. As he walked, his bloodshot eyes automatically yet carefully raked the pavements, scooping up heterogeneous objects, turning them over and discarding them. Occasionally he would stoop to pick up and examine some piece closer, his absorption quickening the step of a nearby typist.

His drunkenness, because simulated, was all the more alarming. His pitching shadow swole and diminished behind him, like that from a swinging lamp. Even the singing was discordant; their puzzled voices, now sharp, now flat, rang out and set the portly pigeons fluttering. And girls in nearby offices paused over their typing to search in handbags for elusive handkerchiefs, listening to his uneven step with fearful concentration. Jaques, strong in his domain, reeled in the gutter, considering the tribute his subjects had brought. A cigarette packet, with an unobserved cigarette flattened to one side; two halfpennies; a broken pencil stub; and a wooden Scotch terrier brooch, with one of its ears missing. He muttered

a service of thanksgiving over this rich harvest as it lay in his scaly palm in the strong sunlight.

As he stood there, swaying in the shadow of the Cenotaph, his eye was caught by a glitter from a drain, further down the road. He lurched down the pavement to investigate, and then paused a moment, sucking at his lips and grunting with pleasure. Gently supported by the rungs of the drain lay a jewelled brooch, a tiny circlet of gems, like a wreath on a tomb. Jaques, mouthing with excitement, stooped and picked it up. It writhed with light in his fingers, framing his face with its reflection. Stuffing it away in a waistcoat pocket, he set off towards Trafalgar Square, swinging his deformed leg purposively.

London, tropical city, carried him on her bosom like some wen on the breast of a fair young girl. The heat of the streets stirred before him, swaying leisurely this way and that, cleaving in his path, folding in again on his heels. He came into Trafalgar Square as an infant into the cold world. Among its feckless, slowly-moving, hypnotized crowd, he moved with lurching purpose. London held out two bouquets of glistening water to him, drenching the upturned faces of country *flâneurs*, up for the day. The pigeons, who lazily evaded the pettish grasp of small fat children bent on their destruction, fluttered before him in alarm. Americans in wide-brimmed grey fedora hats aimed their movie cameras like children at a party, pointing at the food before them. Naïvely they photographed the column, the self-conscious lions, the National Gallery, the assurance houses, the pigeons, and one another. Not unlike the pigeons in character, they strolled about from one group to the next, puzzled, yet with a certain assertiveness that derived, not so much

from a truculent temperament, as from a passionate and confident belief that the whole scene had been created especially for their edification. In the shadow of the dumb lions they filled the air with their cries. One took a short sequence of Jaques as he thrust himself through birds and people, who formed alarmed eddies at his feet.

The heat lay like a dead weight; only the Americans showed signs of positive activity. While they bustled, the rest of the crowd moved with resignation. Their flaccid, nerveless faces filled the pavements. Jaques lurched among them with the lack of concern of a dog in a corn-field.

Nor did he pause in the dusty desertion of Whitcomb Street to appraise the flavour of the vicinity, disturbed by the heat into hanging curtains of odour. Usually Jaques would stand, on entering such a place, to taste its obtruding personality in the smells that rose from its stones, and which seemed to reveal to him, in some inarticulate manner, the prospect of the area's scavenging. His sense for litter was as highly developed and as responsive as that of a hunting dog for its quarry. Moved by some inexplicable impulse, it was as though he were attracted to gutter spoils by a personal revelation.

Today, however, he ignored such intelligence as he received, and made grotesque haste in the road to turn suddenly into a narrow mews. The twisted buildings reared above his head on either side. His steps clanked on the round cobbles, the irregularity of which gave an added spasticity to his progress. A small grease-covered urchin watched him carefully in the reflection of the mudguard he was polishing.

Jaques paused before a large stable door. The top half

swung open almost immediately, and a man's head appeared.

'Ah, thought I heard you. You got something?'

Jaques did not answer, but feeling in his waistcoat pocket, brought out the brooch he had found, and held it up before the man's face.

'Ah,' said the man, looking at it closely, though without attempting to touch it. 'Very pretty. Very pretty. Yours, is it?'

Jaques did not reply.

'Good. Got to cover myself, d'you see? Let me see it in the light.'

Pushing open the rest of the door, he came into the mews. His soiled grey suit hung limply on his withered frame. His large head was without a vestige of hair, and as he moved into the sunlight which cut down through the houses, the engrimed patterns on his bare skull were thrown into relief, like the veins of a leaf under a powerful light.

Jaques suffered the brooch to be taken from him, and remained where he was, his eyelid twitching and blinking.

'Very pretty,' the man repeated, slowly revolving the flashing thing in his fingers. He looked at Jaques and closed his eyes, as though the trinket's glitter were too strong for him.

'What d'you say to five shillings?'

Jaques held out his hand impassively, and the dealer sorted out two half-crowns from a handful of coins, and dropped them with a heavy clank into his palm. Quickly returning to the door, he disappeared into the well of the building.

The hot sunlight fell on Jaques as he stood swaying in the mews, rubbing the money against the ball of his thumb. His shadow lay like a pile of soiled clothes round his feet. The mews was silent. The urchin had disappeared. Only the thick stutter of traffic rose up faintly from behind the houses, welling into the quiet cracks of the walls. Jaques, the master of monies, merchant, *flâneur*, stood in the sun, tasting the power of his wealth with eager greed. His trembling rocked the houses. His omniscience yielded the day into his power, panting with frightened anticipation. Jaques, king, sorcerer, god, slowly turned and lumbered back along the mews, to the ringing paean of his boots on the cobblestones.

In Leicester Square the heat lay more thickly than ever. The surrounding houses swelled and creaked, the quivering pavements strained their backs towards the sun, while the occupants of the benches dozed and nodded with slow astonishment as it fell through the branches above them, dropping from twig to twig like a silver marble in a pin-table, until it finally broke on their backs and splashed over their shoulders. With the immobile exhaustion of galley-slaves, they sat and felt the lashes of the sun. Their eyes had the glassy fixity that accompanies exhaustion.

O rounded, gaseous globe, who beat so unmercifully
thy suppliant servants;

Whose palace is the arched vacuum of the heavens;
Upon whose unwinking gaze we dare not look directly;
Accept, we beseech thee, the offerings of our twisted
bodies,

Wrung from reluctant pores by subtle arts,
And cast at thy feet with all humility and ecstasy.

Suffer, we pray thee, our desires to multiply,
That we, taunting the curious flesh with trained
gestures,
May worship thee in all fullness and gladness,
All the days of our life.
Amen.

Into the circle of panting sun-worshippers Jaques lurched insentiently. His eye fell upon a paper packet on one of the benches, and making his way down the aisle of the outraged congregation, he sat down and picked it up, and unwrapped it with the unwavering concentration of a scientist. It proved to be two uneaten sandwiches, so soft that they could hardly have been cut an hour. Without surprise Jaques began to eat them. The familiar rustle of the paper had attracted a number of sparrows, and these now formed a semi-circle round his feet, watching him with their heads on one side. Such crumbs as escaped his lips, however, fell into his lap, and seeing this one or two flew up to perch on his knee. Soon he had a dozen or more at their luncheon. Jaques ignored them completely, perhaps he did not even see them. Every time he raised his hand to his mouth, there was a slight flutter of disturbance; every time he let it fall, it was repeated. So Jaques sat among the sun-worshippers, eating well at chance, with sparrows in his lap.

Midday struck from the spire of a drowned church, engulfed in a flood of tenements. The sonorous notes floated out across the square, hung suspended a few moments, and were absorbed into the parched earth. Twelve o'clock, separating the frenzy of the obsessional, morning, nervous, puppet-like activity of the office, from the gentle calm of the afternoon; half a million clerks walking in

their sleep; twelve o'clock, the apotheosis of the day, broke on Jaques and drenched him with time. Even the sparrows were splashed, and they flew unsteadily to the trees, where they could look down on the heads of those below.

Jaques sat, muttering and twitching, reflecting on man's ethical dilemmas like any salt-and-pepper-suited philosopher, watching the strange gyrations of everyday individuals. He, to whom today was unique, complete, good in and for itself, could not feel their apprehensions for tomorrow. He to whom tomorrow was only the prospect of being rewarded in kind for his strict surveillance, could not feel their concern for today. As they trotted past, their eyes focused on the hypothetical, Jaques saw in them only the carriers of trinkets in whose wake his livelihood lay.

As the lunch hour deepened, the bustle of the pavements took on a more desperate note, and the noise rose in pitch to an hysterical whine. The anxious, rapid, purposeless walk of passers-by quickened even further as it became laced with immediate and coherent intention, that of eating. A slight, premeditative, thin-lipped smile played about their mouths. Their steps grew faster and more insistent as the prospect of lunch grew nearer. Queues of patient worried clerks began to form in cafés. As they stood in file like schoolboys, breathing in the familiar steam and smoke, they fingered their short bristly moustaches, orange with cheap cigarette smoke, like parliamentarians over some knotty point of public usage.

At length the anxious preoccupation communicated itself to the silent worshippers in Leicester Square. Some,

among them Jaques, rose and shuffled out to the obligato of the sparrows' twitter. Some produced bundles of thick uneven sandwiches and began to eat them systematically, a sizable communion. But some, whose souls were caught up in the ecstasy of worship, drew in the sun through all their breathing pores, and needed no further nourishment. Their eyes closed, their lips half open, they submitted to the divine embrace as travellers who had reached the end of their journey, and could relax their vigilance. In them were the ecstatic, in them were the elect.

Jaques made his uneven way along Coventry Street, through the dancing crowds and into a large cheap restaurant. Pushing his way to the head of the queue, he demanded tea. Those in the queue regarded him with mild hate, some muttering their expostulation in a singsong undertone. Jaques heard nothing. He stood by the cash desk, raking the room carefully from row to row, weighing the imponderable advantages of place, and laying his itinerary. Under his spasmodic gaze the eaters became nervous and apprehensive, fearing to make a movement that would attract his attention, and perhaps his company. One fearful clerk stopped eating altogether, and pushing his half-eaten meal aside, gulped quickly at his coffee, and rose, sadly hungry, and left. Jaques, the teacup rattling in his hand, quickly made his way to the vacated seat, and sat down. Ignoring the inspired horror of his companions at meat, he fell upon the remainder of the clerk's meal with vigour, spooning the tepid formless pieces into his mouth with methodical haste. Splashes of gravy fell on his waistcoat, adding a further patina to the pattern, whose design had been long since obscured, like the background of an old master. Fragments of cold potato lodged

in his buttonholes. The noise of his eating filled the room; office girls affected a self-conscious gentility.

Jaques moved from table to table, finishing the remains of uneaten lunches, like an epicure at a buffet. His uneven steps rang out among the chair-legs. Those eating lost their appetites, yet did not dare to stop. They ate anxiously, quickly, and left without drinking their coffee. His shadow hung over them like guilt, urging them on. Yet it is doubtful whether he saw any of them. His whole concentration lay in the food; he ate in complete isolation, excluding everything else from his consciousness, as a child brings its whole self to bear on a hearth game, shutting away the larger sphere of adult irrelevance. So, absorbed, childlike, Jaques played amongst the crockery, making believe that what he ate was real.

At length he finished. He drank his tea noisily, and it dripped from the corners of his mouth, making two lines through the dust and stubble like a clown's make up. Then he rose and went out, cleansing his body in the sun-drenched air of the street. As he came out of the shadow of the doorway, the light fell upon the gaping rims of his eyes, and they shone bright red as though the eyeballs were encased in fire. He paused for a moment on the chequered threshold, and then launched himself, flashing, into the hysterical ebb and flow of the passing crowd.

See Jaques, hunger assuaged, borne like a paper boat, bobbing up and down in the fury of a gutter storm. His angry, leaping face disappeared and reappeared above the heads of the waves as he strained towards Piccadilly Circus. The oncoming crowd, fearful of his violent aspect, were nevertheless yet more fearful of not keeping up

with the will-o'-the-wisp leader they blindly followed. Like cattle they hesitated before him, and were then impelled onwards by the dull insistence of those behind. The same expression hung on all their celluloid faces, the same tepid phrases waited on their lips.

Jaques forced his way through these unlovely creatures as one plunges through thicket grass, hacking a passage at random. As he reached the corner of the Haymarket, he was seized with a need to relieve himself. Edging towards the road, he managed to break through the interstices of the crowd into the gutter. There he stood, one foot on the kerb, staring with pleasure, while the imperative liquid ran out of his trouser leg, and picked its way towards the drain. None of the passers-by, intent on their salvation, appeared to notice.

It was thus that Faith saw him for the first time.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAITH HAD LEFT HER HOUSE with a feeling of buoyant anticipation. Pausing on the steps, she smelt the hot morning delicately. She stayed a moment with closed eyes, sunning herself like a peacock, before making her way to the bus stop. At Trafalgar Square she alighted, and looked at her watch. It was only a quarter past twelve, and she had no intention of being early. Henry, she knew, hated to be kept waiting. He dealt with reality as precisely as a watchmaker, arranging the minute segments of time and space with care and exactitude. And because he disliked the rude crushing of his airy temporal structures that her lateness involved, Faith felt that it was only fair to him that she should be late. By his reproachful flutterings he re-established the authority so necessary to his self-esteem. Moreover, it also enabled her to indulge her favourite game of omnipotence.

In order to pass the time, she went into the National Gallery, passing under the great portico as nonchalantly as a mermaid wandering among the basalt pillars of the forgotten isles. Today, instead of following her usual practice of deciding beforehand on one particular painting, and then ignoring the siren call of everything else, she allowed herself to be taken up by the currents of colour and form, and set down where they willed her. As she entered the first gallery, she felt herself to be the nexus of a host of conflicting forces, pulling this way and that like

children about her. The steady, powerful, throbbing colours of the Italian renaissance painters strove with the emotional miracles of medieval blue and gold, and the ethereal fairylands created by Claude and Poussin. Slowly, fitfully at first, but with increasing sureness, she was swept away towards the Claudes, whose blue horizons seemed in accord with her present mood of romantic lyricism. In the middle of the room she paused and looked about her. Like Alice, she saw gilt-bordered windows into other worlds, whose gardens shimmered under unfaltering sunshine. How she, too, longed to be able to walk on that smooth, dappled grass, to lean in the shade of those giant trees. But serene though the beauty of the Claudes was, it was towards a painting of movement that she found herself eventually drawn, Poussin's *Bacchanalian Dance*.

Faith had been half aware of some whispered premonition that it would be to this picture that she would eventually come. It had been a source of immense emotional pleasure to her at one time; hardly a week went by but that she went to see it. Lately, however, she had been seduced by the power of Titian and Rubens, by the sheer measured force of their painting. Now she wondered how she could have deserted this reckless scene. As she drew nearer, so the familiar message flooded around her; the details which she had discovered with delight, now surprised her anew. The complete abandon of the urchin cherub who lay on the ground, absorbed and intent on the passage of ants, which the stamping of the revellers drove hither and thither in frantic scurry; the blueness of the bowl into which a nymph squeezed the verdant juice; the unbelievable absurdity of the pattern of flying feet; and most of

all, the infectious sensual glee of the armless, horned and garlanded, microphallic satyr. In his wrinkled, lustful face lay the message of the victory of humanism over the forces of twisted guilt. Did she but have the faculty, Faith would have thrown off her clothes and plunged into the picture to join the revelry, if only to save the lascivious hoofed creature in the foreground, intent on molesting a none too unwilling nymph, from the drubbing he was in danger of receiving from her angry and jealous sister.

So intent was she on the delights of the detail, that she did not notice the person standing beside her until he spoke.

‘It is a charming picture, don’t you think?’

Faith stepped back suddenly, and looked round, startled at the intrusion of reality into her thoughts. A little polished old man, dressed in a flowered waistcoat and grey suit, with a monocle hanging on a black ribbon, was examining the painting carefully through a hand magnifying glass. He did not take his eyes from the picture, but continued:

‘Every age has its escapism. Our friend here was no doubt stifled by the ceremony of Louis the Thirteenth’s court. His panacea for human ills lay in a return to god-like form. Today we ask nothing better than to be allowed to slip into oblivion unmolested. Modern pictures are always fragmentary, eh?’

He turned from the painting, and regarded Faith from under his neat white eyebrows. To do this he had to bend his head forward slightly, and she could see under his thin hair the wrinkled sere pate of old age.

She smiled. A rush of pity mixed with affection possessed her, and her smile fell on him like a tender mantle.

'I'm afraid I like this for purely personal and emotional reasons,' she said, at the same time nodding her head at him to show that she did not intend a rebuff.

'But of course, of course. Everybody bases their artistic judgements on personal and emotional reasons. That is what appreciation means. But what is interesting, is it not, is why this picture should stir such emotions in you?'

He smiled triumphantly, and at the same time with tolerant benignity, as a theologian might score heavily in a disputation, and feel a rush of Christian grace towards his opponent.

Faith began to feel slightly annoyed at this threatened catechism, and to wish him gone. She did not want to be rude, however, and so she concealed her irritation, and replied ingenuously:

'It's so carefree, isn't it?'

His voice was jubilant.

'Ah, there you have it! Carefree! The desire of the poor harassed modern soul to escape from the fetters of convention, from the puritanical tyranny of the intense life we lead today, cooped up and shut in, not only by the vile jackpot architecture of the Victorians, but also by their stupid morals. How we all long to cavort with these innocents on the grass. You look surprised at the idea of such an old man as myself cavorting? You are making the common mistake of assuming that physical age has some connection with spiritual and emotional age. Nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, it is only as our experience grows that we are able to treat with the disdain due to them the everyday conventions that so irk us. Only whom you would call the old are really free!'

He had advanced closer to her during this speech, and

was by this time only a few inches away. His body gave out a strong dry odour of freshly cleaned tapestries; his skin, though immaculately clean, was covered by a white dust, as though by each cleaning he was being rubbed away. He had altogether a brittle, mummy-like quality that Faith, in the warmth of her living flesh, found repugnant. However, she stood her ground, and answered him.

‘No, it is not their immorality that I find so entrancing but their complete lack of bothering themselves about it. Our modern . . . ’

But he did not allow her to finish.

‘Ah, yes, our modern satyrs are so consciously naughty, you were going to say?’

His beady eyes flickered, and without waiting for her to reply, he continued.

‘Of course, of course. Quite sickening. Flaunting their little peccadilloes like rude children. You are quite right. Maturity does not consist of what you do, but the non-chalance with which you do it. But, my dear lady’ (and here he grasped her wrist with a cold, dry but surprisingly strong grip, and much against her will pulled her close so that his thin blue lips were only a few inches from her face) ‘you are really like the rest of your charming sex, you know, whether you like it or not.’

Faith made a gesture, as of warding him off, but he ignored it, and only held her wrist the tighter. His voice had taken on a sharp, metallic quality, and his eyes bulged and shone. She looked round anxiously, but the gallery was empty.

‘You think that you would prefer to live in this picture, innocent debauchery and the carefree life, but you wouldn’t, you know, you wouldn’t. You’d hate it. You

think that your absurd tricks of flirtation, your coquetry, your skittishness, would be as effective there as here, and that you would have only to look at one of those hairy fellows from under your long eyelashes, and he would be at your mercy. But you are very much mistaken.'

His voice was becoming faster and faster; the veneer of cultured accent had disappeared, and it rasped on her ear like a file. His breathing was laboured, and she could feel his trembling through the rude grip he held her in.

'You are mistaken, I say. These satyrs are rough fellows—they are not like your drawing-room lovers. I do not think you would like their hard, slobbering mouths, their horny hands, their rough, hairy knees . . . '

With an effort, Faith succeeded in freeing her wrist. She was severely frightened, but she was determined not to show it, and she turned an angry, outraged look upon him. She opened her mouth to utter some biting reproof, and then closed it again. He appeared to have become completely unaware of her presence. His eyes were fixed and glassy, his body trembling, his lips still faintly moving. He had succumbed to some kind of ecstatic trance, a state which frightened Faith more than his previous behaviour. For one fraught moment she noticed that his face had taken on the leering aspect of the painted satyr, and then, clutched by panic, she turned and half ran out of the gallery, pausing in her haste only when she had reached the portico.

Trafalgar Square lay before her, aching in the dizzy heat. The column loomed over it like some sinister black guardian, in whose shadow magic rites were being practised. The meandering figures had taken on grisly purpose. The fountains glinted like knives of steel, swaying

in the breeze, reaching out for yielding flesh. On the far side of the square, a group of people were engaged in some horrible rite with pigeons. Their screams were drowned in the discordant wail that rose from a one-stringed instrument at the foot of the gallery steps. Faith descended them slowly. On the pavement a crouching heap of tattered clothes drew the sagging notes she had heard from a wooden fiddle board. She threw a sixpence into the open cap to purge herself, to exorcize her mind, and leaving the gallery behind her, turned up Whitcomb Street.

It was not a turning that she would normally have taken. On the whole, Faith preferred busy streets, not from any conscious need for security, but because she enjoyed studying the effect of her personality on the passers-by. The studied indifference of those fashionable idlers who were angrily aware that their own blatancy was shown up by her exquisite dress sense; the uninhibited, protracted stare of those who, having nothing to hope for, could at least derive full measure from the sense allowed them; the naïve awe of down-town tarts, spending their mornings in the West End, wistfully peering into lingerie windows; the anxious deference of commissionaires and policemen; all these were a source of considerable satisfaction to her. In a sense, she laid more store by these inarticulate compliments than by the flattery of her friends, and the absence of the former would have disturbed her far more than any falling off in the quality of the latter. To walk slowly up a busy street, and to have the oncoming crowd form an avenue for her passing, an avenue bordered with appreciative glances, was a sweet experience for Faith.

This morning, however, she felt in no condition to receive the homage of the crowds. She had suddenly become aware of a latent hostility in the humanity that surrounded her, a humanity from which she had previously anticipated nothing but admiration, and she wished, for the moment, to put it behind her.

The shouts of the sabbat and the cries of the tortured were swallowed up by the tall green buildings as though a door had closed. The dank shadow of the walls fell upon her like a pall. The sun no longer bludgeoned her with its ringing heat, and she was able to quieten her agitation and assemble her thoughts. Already the commonsense view was beginning to prevail, and she could allow her panic to escape under control. It ebbed from her body gently, leaving behind a quiet relaxation. It was true it had been an unpleasant experience, but pity was due more to him than to her. She had escaped relatively unscathed, while he could hope only for a temporary reprieve. The pace of her steps slackened, their green echoes ceased to reverberate between the buildings. The emptiness of the street was like a balm to her; she gratefully absorbed the silence as carved wood soaks up soothing oil. The deep olive shadows thrown by the heavy sunlight served to accentuate the illusion of the buildings' height and crookedness. It was as though she were moving through a set designed by Pryde, dwarfed by shabby castles. The mews that branched off the street at right-angles served only to confirm the impression. Their rickety buildings, some brightly painted with bulging window boxes, were the scenery for the opera of Montmartre. They had not the gloomy air of decay that the street had, but they were equally unreal; plywood façades, decorated with poster

paint by an artist whose aim was more to amuse than to convince. In one of the mews, a spiky-haired scarecrow boy was polishing a cardboard limousine. Although the other actors had left, yet he continued his absurd polishing for all the world as though it were a real car which shone so brightly under the arc-lamps. Faith smiled at his naïveté, and he flashed a grin at her, as a jeweller suddenly places a living stone on a square of black velvet.

She had by this time arrived in Coventry Street, and the silence of the set was replaced by the sound of traffic. She felt an inward surge of pleasure at it, and turning the corner, plunged gladly into the river that swept by. She was instantly caught up, swirled across to the edge of the pavement, and born along swiftly. The pace of her walking seemed to bear very little relation to the speed with which she travelled, and while she sped along bravely for a few yards, she would suddenly be drawn into a tiny eddy, where she would be held up completely by currents of people, slowly revolving in the opposite direction. They would circle lazily for a moment, as boxers spar for an opening, and then, abruptly reclaimed by the force that had rejected them, would be whisked off anew.

It was during one of these backwater pauses that Faith became aware that she was being watched with an intensity that held her fixed, pinned and mounted. She looked round and her eyes met those of Jaques. Jaques, lord of life, pissing in the gutter, held her for a moment in his horned palm. Stunned by the lasciviousness of his twisted stare, she let her eyes fall, only to see the water he was making. Unthinkingly she watched its flow falter and cease, and then she was twitched from the spot by a renewed surge of current, and set down only when she

had reached the steps of the Roumanian, in the lobby of which she could see Henry's immaculate impatient head.

Behind her, at a few yards' distance, Jaques lurched in pursuit, his trousers clapping against his thighs.

Two

CHAPTER FIVE

‘HENRY!’

His dapper figure was ridiculously reassuring. The tapestried walls of the foyer encircled his head with the strange creatures of medieval fancy, but his pink, carefully groomed face looked up at her with that half-wistful, half-complacent smile with which he faced the armaged-dons of the twentieth century.

‘Faith, my dear.’

He took her elbow, and guided her towards the dining room.

Impossible, she thought, quite impossible. Just don’t believe it.

‘... rather than go into the bar,’ Henry was saying, ‘as if we were commercial travellers with expense accounts. Besides, it’s irrational to stand uncomfortably looking at the barman when we could sit and drink the same drink...’

‘That depends, surely, on the barman,’ she said quickly, to save him the embarrassment of wondering whether he could finish his sentence.

She sat down heavily, suddenly realising that her legs would not have borne her an inch farther. Henry was giving her his most redeemer-like smile, and she remembered with some guilt that he had suggested one o’clock.

‘Henry, I’m sorry I’m late. I got involved with Poussin in the National Gallery. You know, the *Bacchanalian*

Dance. It had been so long since I had looked at it that I had almost forgotten how marvellous it was.'

Her words came with a rush. Or should I say, I could say, I met a pervert in the National Gallery, and then watched an exhibitionist in Coventry Street. Shake off the dead hand of the maiden aunt, as you're always saying, Henry, my sweet, my charmer.

'There's the place to wash your mind of the twentieth century,' she said. 'Even in its fantasies, the classic age kept its sense of propriety.'

If he were just to reach out his hand, he could touch her breasts.

She took off her gloves.

O lovely and immaculate lady, thought Henry, with breasts like ripe plums, and I have only to reach out my hand.

'So what twentieth-century impropriety were you seeking to wash your mind of, Faith?' he asked her.

As she watched, the blood ran out in a web of thin veins in his ears.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'I feel that to be alive at all in this age is a kind of impropriety in the face of nature. For all their slops in the streets, at least they believed in the Golden Age.'

The waiter brought two dry martinis. Henry supervised their setting down carefully, and then said:

'Perhaps if people use the street as a chamber pot, the advantages of rural life are forced upon your notice.'

But it was impossible that he could have seen.

'Henry, don't be tiresome. You're worse than Sterne.'

The pink of his ears spread to his face, but his expression remained as dry as ever.

‘Women are invariably unable to appreciate Sterne, my dear.’ She had spilt a drop of the dry martini on her dress; it ran into the material, and slowly spread until it was nearly as big as the aureole it covered. ‘Not because of his urinology, but because of the inevitability of his logic.’

‘Sheer nonsense!’ said Faith briskly. ‘Really, Henry, that’s the most meaningless statement I’ve ever heard you utter.’ His bright eyes flickered back to her face, but not quickly enough. ‘So now let’s eat, shall we? I’m starving.’

Abashed, he beckoned to the waiter.

He was slightly bald, and his skin-covered skull reminded her of a duck’s egg, and the way the shell is so papery. As though one might crack and eat it, like in Lilliput, only it wasn’t Lilliput.

And the curious taste of the dry martini, and the way it hung on her tongue.

‘And so David has gone to tend the *rentiers* of the South Coast?’

‘He’s gone to a conference on hernias in Bournemouth.’ She gave him a look. ‘And so I’m a grass widow. Which reminds me of how my one ambition in the fourth form was to read a book I had somewhere seen, called, as I thought, *A Widow in Thrums*. I assumed “thrums” was an earthy word for labour, and expected to be able to chill the other girls’ hearts.’

‘And did you ever read it?’ he asked, thinking of David’s specializing in hernias, much as one might collect erotica.

‘No, I never did. I either discovered the real title, or found some more immediate source of satisfaction.’

Nostalgia for the days in the fire-glow.

'I somehow can't think of you in the fourth form, Faith.'

'Oh, I was the prototype of all the girls' stories ever written. Busily inking my knees so the holes in my lisle stockings wouldn't show, when I wasn't having heart-to-hearts with the gym mistress in the equipment store.'

He made a gesture, as though to ward it off.

He comes very near, she thought, to wearing rings at times.

'And the horrid miscellanea we used to accumulate in our desks.' She pursued him relentlessly. 'And cogging off the prefects, and cleaning one's nails with the compasses during French. There was a girl who used to cut little slithers of skin off her hands during the lessons so that by the end of the day her books and blotting paper were all speckled with blood. She had a box full of razor blades, but she would only show it to her friends.'

'Faith!' He nearly shouted.

She finished her drink, and raised her brown eyes to look at him.

'Ah, Henry, there is nothing in life quite so sinister as the soul of a sixth-form schoolgirl. Yes, please, I will have another.'

She was enjoying herself.

'But only English ones,' he said, going with her at last. 'Part of the legacy of the Reformation. Adolescence in England is very like what the middle ages were in Europe.'

'Oh, I don't know. We tend always to think of others in terms of superior exports. Look at Annette, for instance. Out at the pictures every night; she knows every star's

love life as well as her own, and she gets a vast literature every week to feed her voracious appetite for cosy and disgusting details of their eating, sleeping and medical habits.'

'Where can she find that many pictures?' he asked.

The question oblique, though more of Carnegie than Ovid or Vatsayama. Should her messenger be out, or her nurse negligent, steal up with gifts of betel nut.

'Lord knows. But it was Walter Pidgeon last night, Gregory Peck tonight. And to think she's French. It's just ridiculous.'

'But, to give her her due, she does agree that they're strictly not comparable. "For the heart," she said the other day, "are the films we make in France; but these American films, they are for the body!" What can one do?'

'Well, perhaps she's right. There's strictly no comparison. Think of the economy, the reality of Renoir . . .'

'And the feeling. And *Sous les Toits*, merveilleux, et *Les Enfants*, enchantant . . .'

'Et, ôh ces voix d'enfants chantant dans la coupole!

'Qu'est-ce que c'est, cette coupole, I've always meant to look it up? Have you heard that record . . .'

'Like a dying fall? "Et, ôh ces voix . . ." Verlaine, drunk in a hotel. Why do all dramatic incidents in France always take place in a hotel? Do you remember in *Les Amants* . . .'

'Think of Falconetti in *Le Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*.'

'And René Clair.'

'And *Quai des Brumes*! And the *Italian Straw Hat*!'

They smiled at one another.

'Well, Henry,' she said, 'and how is life with you? I

enjoyed the last issue, especially the article on the male animal. Did you write it? I thought so. Excellent, Henry, excellent. And the new poet—what's his name, Hiller, or something? I assume it was in verse, since it was even more explicit than the rest of the magazine. Sometimes I wonder how it escapes the censor. High class pornography.'

'Which is saying no more, surely, than it's art. Proust's noble company of neurotics. But anyway, sex is the rage nowadays. Since *Ulysses*, the Watch Committee views with suspicion anything that has no Anglo-Saxon—it must be smutty else.'

'In that case *Paprika* must be above reproach. But then, I know I'm old fashioned in this. I always imagined that printers came out on strike or something if there were dirty words in the manuscript.'

She was somehow more than detached—she was unassailable. Perched on her sexless eminence, she looked down on Henry, tumescent below.

'Tell me, between ourselves, what was it all about? The poem, I mean.'

A waving curtain of steam from the soup hung between them. Try as he did, he could see no further into her eyes than their shining surface.

'Oh, it was a variation on the back-to-the-womb theme, with the sea as the primeval mother. But some of the verbalization was very fine, I thought. Like the "eye-battered ocean" and the "surge and relief of the surf".'

'Verbalization—really, Henry, what a hideous word.'

He was thinking her breasts were like marshmallow. He could imagine the feel of them, lying heavily warm in his cupped hands.

‘What about a new novel, Henry?’ she was saying. ‘It must be five years now since *The House of Cards*.’ She waved what he was going to say aside. ‘Of course you’re too busy. That’s part of it. The symbolization of our nerve-wrecked, overworked generation. You could do it, Henry. If you set your mind to it.’ She divided the red meat fastidiously. It was like watching a surgeon at work. ‘You could write a page a day. Get up half an hour earlier, and it would be finished in no time. Think of it—a new novel by Henry Cooper!’

Part of him was caught up in her enthusiasm. He could do it, after all. And the criticism, critics’ parties, have you read, you must read, have you read, a literary event, Mr. Cooper’s inimitable style, we are again graced, it is with pleasure that I turn, oh well done, Cooper, I say, Cooper, your latest, very good, very good indeed, no such criticism can be made of Henry Cooper’s latest book, master of style, master of situation, master of plot, European figure, foremost writer, literary event.

But he was thinking also of the flesh she was dissecting; red blood-engorged meat.

‘There comes a stage,’ he said, ‘when there is no time left to write novels. Anyway, who writes novels nowadays? Nobody. And who would read them if they did? Nobody. A few Americans occasionally toss off a chapter, put it between covers, and call it a novel, and maybe people even read it, but that’s not writing a novel. An incident is something, but it’s not a novel.’

‘And so you hanker for the good old days of the three-volumed library editions, and Jane making up the fire in the library? Oh, Henry, fie for shame! No, it’s just laziness, and you know it. Ensconced in your editorial chair,

you feel perfectly secure and omniscient, and you're afraid to come down to the jungle again.'

She looked at him triumphantly, almost maternally.

'Come down, Henry!'

She was trying to remember what *The House of Cards* had been about. It had been very good, of course.

'You make me feel like a statue,' he protested. 'What do I come down from? From making a fairly honest living writing as and when I please, instead of churning out hack reviews for nine-tenths of the day so that I could spend the odd ten minutes trying to express something I didn't feel? No, one writes all the novels in one's youth. When you have really experienced all these situations, how could you possibly write about them?'

'The sickened-sage-turning-his-face-to-the-wall pose! Henry, I'm not saying you're not a good editor. You are. Everybody knows it. You know it yourself. *Paprika* makes no concessions to the running dogs, but it is able to maintain a very adequate staff and offices. But it's . . . oh, so ephemeral. People are never moved to greatness by what they read in magazine articles, even good ones. It's only after you've been with a writer for some hours that he begins to work upon you.'

She waved aside the dessert trolley, and ordered coffee. For the moment, she was concerned only with Henry. She saw herself in literary histories as the inspirer of his greatest works. Already she was dealing with the biographers, the pilgrims, disturbing her afternoon sleep.

'Well, perhaps I will,' he said. Who knows? Perhaps he would. Perhaps he could begin to feel again, to think in terms of human values. He was both flattered and stimulated by her enthusiasm, although he knew it was

really enthusiasm for an idea, a set-up that she had imagined, rather than for him, Henry Cooper, even as a writer.

‘What shall it be about?’

She was not even looking at his face, but on some visionary object over his shoulder. He wondered if she was really aware, for the moment, of his presence.

He could feel the coolness of her breasts in his palms.

‘Write an allegory,’ she was saying, ‘about present-day man. About how he is so bound up with his busy day, and his inhibitions, and catching the 8.40, and doing what everyone else does, that he spares no time to be a man at all. Write about a natural man, and how he doesn’t have to do any of these things, and yet, perhaps as a result, is perfectly happy.’

‘A sort of cross between Dostoievsky’s Idiot and Rousseau’s Emile?’

‘This man is more than a man. He’s a god. That’s right—he’s returned from Olympus to give the world a last chance of saving itself—a new messiah. Zeus has decided to blow us all out of existence unless we come to our senses, and he has sent this messenger down.’

‘Does he come in a blast of lightning?’

‘No, that’s just the thing. He’s anyone, living the natural life.’

‘He hasn’t a hope. I can smell the thunderbolts already. Nobody’s going to listen unless he’s got decent press and television coverage. He’ll find himself catching the 8.40 with the rest of us, just to get a chance to talk to someone. And even then he’ll be thought very ill-bred to start talking, especially about living naturally. Why,

they'll pull the communication cord with their umbrella handles, and have the guard throw him out.'

'Well, maybe he's an outcast already. But people can't help liking him because they know he's right, and deep down they want to be the same.'

'It's much more likely they'd avoid him like the plague if he suggests doing all those things they've been repressing these forty-five years.'

'But they want to be like him, really,' she insisted.

She was almost visionary, he thought. He could too easily imagine the sensation of wet softness he would obtain from kissing her mouth, which, just now, was slightly open, so that he could see where the lipstick ended and the red tender flesh of the inner lip began.

'They know at heart that he represents the real life, true existence, while their days are only superficial.'

She drank her liqueur, still quizzing him absently.

'You must write this book, Henry. Let's set the world right. Perhaps there's something in moral re-armament after all.'

He had to look at her carefully to make sure she was not serious.

'You almost convinced me, Faith. I could feel the prophet's mantle already.'

'And why not?' she began again, but he shook his head at her.

'It's not the prophet's mantle,' he said, 'that I don't relish. It's the hair shirt that goes with it.'

And sometimes, she thought, he's so adolescent that it isn't true. It just isn't true.

Moreover, she resented having her liqueur ordered for her.

Alas, poor Henry.

He had only to reach out his hand . . .

'Faith, let's talk about you. I have a proposition to make.'

Even when he was trying to be arch, the effect was altogether too ludicrous. She longed to be gone.

'Spare my blushes,' she said dutifully.

But he was so full of himself that he hardly caught the overtone, and anyway, life was short, youth was love, and he had only to reach out his hand.

'We had a policy conference the other day,' he began fully, and then, quickly, 'and the end of it was that we decided to enlarge the art section.'

'And?'

'And I was asked to suggest a name for art-critic, and, naturally . . .'

'You thought of me? Oh, Henry, that was very sweet of you.'

She could almost have caught him up and hugged him.

'Tell me more. What's the size of the article?'

'Well, it's not fixed, but we thought of a full page.'

'Plus an illustration?'

To have her looking at him.

'Plus a half-plate illustration.'

He would have to fix it with Montrose.

'Oh, it's marvellous, Henry. I'm delighted. I must start right away. I know, I know, it's not definite yet. But with you behind me, it's a sure thing. Let me see. Something new. This is wonderful, Henry, I really mean it. But we need something new to catch them. Some new approach. Something that carries a certain *cachet*, a certain reproach, as it were. Henry, this was sweet of you, it really

was. You know I appreciate it, don't you? I don't need to . . . I know, I've got it! Let's make the article about just one picture. Just select one of the pictures being shewn, and then confine the whole review to that. The idea being, do you see, that true appreciation involves prolonged contact with the art-form, profound thought, and so on. And then the illustration could be of that, or, even better, of a small detail in it which is highlighted in the article. What do you think of that, eh?'

And she would be looking up at him, her breasts cool and heavy in his hands, her mouth slightly open . . .

'And a strong moral code, right from the beginning. All modern art symbolizes the break-up of values, or something like that. Like Rimbaud. Breaking up Mrs. Grundy's world to create Rimbaud's. Or Picasso's. The break-up, and the disappearance of the good shapes, the *Gestalten*, from the materials, the disappearance of the materials themselves, and the pre-ordained pattern, the design that is there all the time, like Michelangelo, releasing the shape in the marble, and the encyclopaedists, and Aristotle trying to find out what was there—no, Plato, the platonic ideas in art, to find them, to understand them, is to express them, but our ears are stopped up with conventions, so we cannot hear the moral behind the aesthetic, an implicit moral, a Holmesian major inarticulate premise, to thyself be true, truth being platonic, not moral, but the same, and there is no way of comparing but morally, like Ruskin and architecture, good because good, because Christian, because good, not pagan, and Pugin the same, but also in materials, to the material be true, and so we come back to craftsmanship, which isn't art at all.'

She took a great gulp of cold coffee.

Her words broke almost ceaselessly against his fantasies, against the firelit bedroom and the white sheen of her skin.

Communication between them, had, in fact, ceased.

‘And craftsmanship involving selection of materials, we find we must not only reveal the hidden platonic *Gestalt* truth, but also select, which is only to say, why good? why perfect? why golden square? Of course, there’s no reason except Kepler’s—circular movement is perfect, since God is perfect. And since God is perfect, therefore Landseer is the best artist, since God is a lamb, and lambs have four legs, and stags have four legs, and Landseer paints stags, and Landseer is impudent, and God is dignified, therefore Landseer is good, and therefore Landseer is the best artist. Q.E.D.’

Her flushed face swam into his vision.

‘Faith—that’s absolutely it.’

He must have spoken too slowly, for she focused her eyes on him, and began to put on her gloves.

‘Well, Henry, there’s not a moment to lose. I really am very grateful to you. You know that, don’t you? I feel I must go and get some of my ideas down, before they escape me. No, don’t bother. I can manage quite easily. It’s been a most delightful lunch, Henry. I’ll give you a ring.’

CHAPTER SIX

THE THICK HEAT OF MIDDAY had eased slightly, and while the sky over the city remained clear and transparent, folds of fleshy clouds had been piling up over Gravesend. Their presence both intensified and dissipated the closeness of the atmosphere, which had moved in on the listless population, while at the same time cracking and splitting to allow draughts of coolness through, which whistled slightly between the narrow walls of air. But these very cracks could only be formed by a further compression of the heat, and thus a great chequer-board of atmospheric pressure lay over Regent Street as Faith hurried down the steps, shaking her head at the doorman who had started forth to call a taxi. She did not notice Jaques in the gutter, who watched her cross the road, and then lumbered after her, pushing past a number of people who had gathered on the pavement, waiting for taxis. As he lurched past the steps, Henry came out of the doors, having paused only to redeem his hat and gloves, and ran down the steps to walk with Faith to the gallery. So intent was he on looking for her, that he stumbled on the last step, and saved himself from falling only by clutching at the passing figure of Jaques.

The taxi-gatherers watched, carefully interested. Jaques, partly out of surprise, swung his arm, and dealt Henry a blow in the small of the back. He did not stop, however, but hurried on, leaving Henry apologetic,

winded, embarrassed and very shaken. One of the nearby watchers picked up his hat, which had rolled quietly over the pavement, and handed it back to him without comment. Henry took it shamefacedly, muttered thanks, and, changing his mind, made his ruffled way to St. James's Park, where he sat for half an hour coming to terms with the time that lay between him and the evening.

Meanwhile Faith, unaware of the abrupt meeting of her suitors, walked briskly down Piccadilly. The crowds had thinned out since lunchtime, and she was able to make her own speed. Jaques's unkempt head bobbed up and down some way behind her, but she knew it not. For her the pavement walkers parted, but her thoughts wrapped her with coming phrases. She was pleased and excited at the prospect of writing regular art criticism; the waywardness of Henry's proposal she had not noticed. Already she could see the arrogant black of the print, preening on the orange page.

A quotation to head the column, preferably in French, obscure, but not obviously so. From Gautier, perhaps, or de Nerval. In italics, in slightly smaller print at the head of the column, across two columns. The title should be the name of the picture, perhaps, or the name of the artist, or both. That in thick black Roman lettering, strong, uncompromising. It would be better with a colon, rather than an apostrophe. Soutine: St. Bernard, rather than Soutine's St. Bernard. And the colon, jet stubby stops, in the centre of the page. No full stop after the title, that would detract from the value of the colon. Then the quotation from Gautier (or de Nerval) in italics, underneath the heading. Should one assume the quotation to be so familiar that the writer's name need not be given? A

little pretentious, a little awkward. It were better given, naturally, quietly, at the end after a dash perhaps, and not below on the next line. —Théophile Gautier, thus. (Or —Gérard de Nerval.) And then the text, beginning with a thick capital letter. It was important to strike a note of surprise with the first word, with the first letter. 'Z' perhaps, Zarathustra, or something like: 'Zeal belongs to the copybooks; it is out of place in the atelier.' Or: 'Zephyr winds disturb ever so slightly the competent handling of so-and-so's chiaroscuro.' But perhaps 'Z' was rather too obvious, unsubtle, crude. A faintly bizarre letter would be happier, such as Y, or F. 'You have only to compare this distraught picture with a Chardin still-life (say) and so-and-so's elaborate structure comes tumbling to the ground.' Or: 'For those who prefer their art anxious, so-and-so's new painting will have a peculiar appeal.' But grammatical, it must be grammatical. And she should cultivate a style, a particular, notable, discernible style, Johnsonian, perhaps, or Carlylian. A style that would enable her readers to relish, as well as to appreciate, her articles. Well-turned sonorous sentences rolling off her tongue, praising or damning.

Faith crossed Piccadilly thoughtfully, and entered Burlington Arcade. She saw herself reflected faintly in glass, silver and wool, as in an aquarium one sees familiar faces peering out from among the fish. A hundred Faiths accompanied her, serenely conscious of their elegant bearing, feeling at home in the atmosphere of restrained extravagance. Behind them, unnoticed, a hundred twitching Jaques, swaying among the merchandise, followed in unhurried pursuit.

There was the question of attitudes to consider. Should

she take up a puritanical, critical attitude, roundly abhorring everything she discussed, allowing her praise to be seen only in some diminution of her scorn? Or should she wax enthusiastic, seeing in different works the satisfactory resolution of a predetermined formula. The former was the easier, the safer method. It appealed, moreover, to intellectual snobbery, an appetite for which she had to cater. On the other hand, it was limited, unspectacular, giving little opportunity for serious criticism. In either case it was necessary to construct some formula, some set of criteria, some implicit standards by which her criticisms could be made. In due course the more astute of her readers would come to perceive them, and would then have the felicity of agreeing with her, or even of anticipating her. This, provided it did not become too general, could be a useful situation. The vanity of those who understood her bases of judgement would ensure their support provided they remained in a minority; that same vanity would provoke the envy and desire for emulation of others.

It was necessary, moreover, to foster some kind of group feeling among her readers. They must feel that by reading her articles they were participating in some friendly intimate activity, some social intercourse that was none the less real and strong because the other members of the society were unseen, or even unknown to them. A reading public is like a fractious child; it has to be wheedled, urged, tempted and persuaded to certain forms of behaviour. It was of paramount importance, Faith thought, that a note of intimacy be set straight away. They must participate in some specific activity which, when repeated a number of times, would then bring them a feeling of emotional security through its repetition. A limited

number of reference books must be established, slowly, and with constant quotation, so that a body of specific knowledge was built up, the elements of which were all of general value, but whose complex had significance only for this one situation. It was difficult to think of works sufficiently vague to sustain whatever interpretation she would care to put on them, and at the same time sufficiently *recherehé* for the reading of them to constitute a definite pledge of fidelity. The *Goncourt Journals* were too obvious. Reynolds's *Discourses*, Haydon's *Autobiography*, Fuseli? None of these would quite suit her requirements. Leonardo's *Notebooks*? Too lucid, too exact to enable her to apply her own interpretations without straining the meaning. Moreover, whereas most of her readers would be able to read French, it was doubtful whether more than a few would be at home with Italian, and to quote a translation would, of course, be unthinkable.

Involved with such problems, Faith made her gentle way along Bond Street. Faith, nymph, art critic, wended her way among the groves of the West End; Jaques, satyr, tramp, pursued her with lyrical glee. The heat was thicker and closer than ever. The policeman at Bruton Street visibly perspired, and even commercial jews acquired that languor which is the prerogative of the parasitical in less enervating weather. Gowns and costumes wilted in the windows, the dust on the shelves gleaming like phosphorescent surf. Dogs lay in doorways and watched the world reproachfully; shop assistants had neither heart nor energy to push them away. It was as though the city were being drawn into the very depth of the sun itself.

The gallery Faith was approaching looked white, cool

and inviting, and she plunged into its doorway with a sigh of relief. It was remarkable not only for its exhibitions, but also for the personality of its proprietor, a Frenchwoman of huge proportions and immense erudition. Madame would not have been out of place selling sea whelks in a Breton village; she sold modern works of art with equal *cachet*. There was not an art critic in London who did not live in fear of her scorn; not one who did not relish her approbation. As Faith entered, she was speaking fiercely to a wispy young man, popularly alleged to be her kept lover. Certainly his ineptitude and unresponsiveness made it very difficult to see any other recommendation which might have appealed to a woman of such formidable business acumen.

‘ . . . and what, my dear Hubert, you can have done with it, I cannot imagine. Not that I seem to be able to expect from you, not that I do in fact expect from you, the evidence of even the slightest jot of common-sense. You have given me the experience enough to prevent that, indeed, yes. But, *nom de Dieu*, am I to understand that I must supervise even the most simple tasks that a child could perform, and with the much less fuss? Is it that I ask of you too much? Is it that? Or perhaps you find your duties, elementary though they are, my dear Hubert, too much for you. Would it be that perhaps? Or perhaps there is the other explanation of these examples of the extraordinary stupidity, and if there is then pray do not withhold from me such things. Eh, Hubert, my dear?’

As she spoke, Madame’s white hair, which framed her face like a wayward halo, ebbed and flowed about her ears with the vehemence of her expression. Her jowled, shining face shook and moved under the passage of her words.

Even her vast bosom, swelling flesh bound in by black silk, rippled as a backwater will ripple with the echo of a dropped stone. But Hubert offered no reply to her outburst, only standing by the desk with sullen hanging shoulders, letting the tirade play about his pricked ears with no sign of recognition, and Madame, giving vent to a final exclamation of impatience and resignation, moved heavily into the gallery behind Faith.

She had been standing near the doorway, ostensibly examining a small contraption of wood and wire, but half interested in listening to the one-sided conversation that was filling the shop with sound. Now she moved away, self-consciously aware that her curiosity had been transparent. Madame went to the carved desk in the centre of the room, and sat down breathing heavily. There was nobody else in the gallery. The drawn white room, with its gaudy windows on to a dream world of fantasy, settled itself about them. Faith in her lazy circuit, hearing the rattling breath, the rasping of papers, and the quiet hum of the fluorescent lights, applied these sounds to the coloured patterns that leapt before her, until her senses were dizzy with the juggled impact of the whole. Madame's voice bore through her stupor like a drill.

'That Teuilly you regard, Madame, is a dream. I would not part with it for gold. Always I have had it, it is an encouragement, you understand. You like it, Madame?'

With difficulty Faith focused her eyes on the painting before her. On a large chalk-white ground, two circles of blue and orange revolved noiselessly.

'I am not altogether sure that I understand it,' she replied, turning to smile at the desk. Madame leaned amply back in her chair.

'It is an allegory, Madame, an allegory of love and death. Since Aristotle the philosophers would have us believe that the mind is free, is immortal. Only it is dragged down into mortality by the body, Madame, that it cannot shake off. Blue is the colour of the intellect, thought in its purest form; scarlet the colour of lust. Our worthy physicists have suggested that it is the fact of their whirling that attracts stars. Teuilly discovered the same thing long before them. The body is attracted to the mind because in degrading it, in forcing the intellect to play the second fiddle, it achieves satisfaction only. But the mind is attracted towards the body because it is dependent upon it, it is, how they say, contingent. It is the ironical situation, is it not, Madame, that this free mind of ours spends most of its time in thinking about love, an attribute most obviously of the body, and in doing so ensures its own extinction? Thus through love the mind finds death. It was a personal present to me from Teuilly; I should not part with it, except to someone who would appreciate it and love it as I have done.'

Faith said quickly: 'I am not a collector, I cannot afford to buy pictures.'

'I should not insult Madame's intelligence by offering the Teuilly at less than seven hundred guineas. It has been to me like a child. I shall be sorry to lose it.'

'I am afraid, Madame, that . . .'

'I do not bargain, Madame, and six hundred would be the least I could ask. I admire Madame's taste. Out of all the paintings in this gallery, and many are the more recognized masterpieces, it is that one that I should choose to live with. People are only now beginning to understand that realistic pictures become boring much more

quickly than the abstract. The abstract is more than a communication from the painter to the beholder, it is a conversation between them, a conversation that depends in part upon the quality of the beholder's mind.'

'Like coals in the fire,' said Faith mildly.

'No, Madame, not like coals in the fire, which are arranged haphazard. The painter has spent much time in the arrangement of his colours, he has picked them, and dressed them in forms appropriate to the emotions he is trying to arouse. The fire is not a work of art, Madame, any more than the sunset, or your English winter. That Teuilly on your walls, and you get more warmth than from a hundred fires.'

'And it would cost more than a thousand,' thought Faith, but she did not say so. Instead she turned to look at the picture again. It had shrunk, both in size and in intensity. Whether this was the result of its price, or of its analysis, she could not say, but it no longer had any appeal for her. A few splashes of paint on a chalked canvas for six hundred pounds. Ludicrous.

'It does not appeal to me,' she said, a little more loudly than she had intended. Madame did not reply, but shrugged her shoulders, and began writing again. Faith turned back to the other paintings. That which she sought, a small Derain, had disappeared, and she did not feel equal to asking Madame whether it had been sold, or merely dispossessed. She drifted disconsolately about the room. None of the paintings meant anything at all to her. In some she could recognize, as through a haze, some familiar objects of her sense-experience, distorted, varicoloured, and set in a nightmare of incongruity, but nevertheless recognizable. She looked upon these with

that disinterested awareness with which one sees the faces of relatives from a death-bed. They have meaning only in a world to which one does not belong any more. She began to realize that she had placed too much reliance on her aesthetic sensibility, that these paintings stirred no emotion, carried no message for her at all. Daubs of paint stuck on pieces of stretched canvas—she could not really take them seriously to save her life. They were amusing, certainly; she would allow that. But one did not wish to be amused all the time. And then there was art. Faith began to laugh soundlessly as each new picture fell within her field of vision. The art critic for *Paprika*, a most erudite and sensitive woman, an artist in her own right, moved round the walls of the gallery, swaying with silent laughter.

Opposite the Teuilly, Faith came to herself again. She had made a complete circuit of the room, without the slightest imprint of what she had seen. She might as well have been at the Zoo for all she could remember. Only the two spinning wheels of the Teuilly mocked her. She fought to gain objectivity. She stood back and raised her eyebrows; she leaned forward and inspected the pigment. Madame had since left the room; she no longer felt impelled to scribble meaningless phrases in her catalogue. In fact, there was nothing to hold her. The Derain she had come to see was gone. Already she had wasted a great deal of time, and she wanted to let Henry know that evening. There was another gallery just round the corner, where there had been a delightful pastiche Chagall.

But Faith made no effort to move. The Teuilly held her in a thrall. It was a challenge for her first review, something that would shock people into thinking about it. Perhaps she could tear the technique to pieces.

'The more fantastic productions of the abstract painters are usually excused on the grounds of consummate craftsmanship, but the small Teuilly now hanging at the Blue Gallery in Brook Street has not even that recommendation.'

But there was so little to the technique, it was nothing more than poster painting. There was nothing to criticize. Reproof of inadequacy, perhaps.

'A tremendous subject requires a tremendous artist, and Teuilly, with the small canvas now hanging in the Blue Gallery in Brook Street, has tackled a subject far beyond his artistic powers.'

It would, perhaps, be unwise to mention the interpretation laid on the picture by Madame; she had no doubt it was correct, but it would involve a sense of obligation she wished to avoid. Moreover, to take the interpretation for granted would picque the more sensitive of her readers, and personal accusations of ignorance could always be met with a bland presentation of her knowledge. Faith began to warm towards the painting, and she made a few notes of the more salient features that held out possibilities for her comment. Henry, she felt, would be pleased with her selection. Georges Teuilly was sufficiently respectable to lend an air of serious scholarship to the review, while remaining modern enough to attract the readers on the fringe. Some comments on technique were necessary, though without making it the central feature of her analysis. Perhaps she could spend, say, a third of her article in a homily on abstract painting in general. Function of all painting to stimulate emotion, emotion appropriate to the subject, two methods, indirect, by presenting scene through which artist hopes to arouse

emotion by conventional associations, direct, by arranging colours, shapes in such a way that emotion stimulated without conscious association, success of latter depends on extent to which shapes arouse same feelings in public, and ability of artist to predict and assess these feelings, hence most successful abstract artists least remote from normality. No, that was not the only conclusion; moreover, it was not born out by the facts.

Faith shifted her weight on to her other foot. In order to judge the painting by these criteria, it would be necessary to state the emotions which it was intended to arouse. To avoid embarrassing letters, it was necessary for her to be absolutely dogmatic on that point. She looked at the picture with careful distaste. Some sort of frustration, she supposed, was indicated.

‘In this painting, Teuilly has attempted to state the universal dilemma of the dioecious creature; the dilemma stated, but not resolved, in the confused theses of existentialism.’

She suddenly felt tired and bored, her feet had swollen to twice their size, and the coolness of the room, previously so inviting, now oppressed her as a tomb. The walls, naked of their hangings, crowded in on her as on Poe’s wretched prisoner. The thick pile of the carpet clogged her step, the unwavering insistent shrill of the light bludgeoned her senses. She moved towards the shop, drawn by Madame’s voice as sailors drift towards the sirens’ rocks.

Hubert stood at the table, turning over the leaves of a large folio as before. Only the fact that his sullen scowl had given place to a sullen sneer gave any indication of change. Madame’s whole aspect, however, had undergone

a metamorphosis so complete that Faith stood fixed in the doorway with astonishment. They neither appeared to notice her.

‘Oh, my little one, I am the old fool, the meddler, the senseless old woman, who hurts her little Hubert. Mother of God, may I suffer for the harm I have done, for the stupid things I have said. Chéri, mon p’tit, tell your old stupid Céleste what she can do to make up for the silly things she said, how she can earn the forgiveness of her little Hubert. She has been wrong a thousand times, always it is she who says without thinking, who hurts her little one without thinking, who is the big fool, and deserves the punishment. Can you not forgive her this one time, Chéri?’

Madame’s great bosom trembled as she made as if to touch his arm in supplication. He shrugged irritably, and appeared to immerse himself in the illustrations on the table.

Faith moved silently through the room, her face hanging with rage. That this wretched traitoress of a Breton slut should have attempted to dominate her, and should so nearly have succeeded, this infuriated her. In feeling savage contempt for her supplicatory mouthings, Faith realized that she came near to feeling contempt for herself. And this fact itself she attributed to the inept duplicity of the huge sagging creature, who had begun to cry, quietly, as if afraid to disturb her master’s concern with the folio. Faith felt as though she had witnessed some savage act of sacrilege against her sex. She stepped into the fierce sunlight resentful and appalled.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JAQUES, RAFFISH, MAN ABOUT TOWN, doyen of the city streets, waited for his love on Brook Street pavements. Through the heat passing *flâneurs* leered and lurched about him. Brook Street bustled with swains, waiting for Faith. Some in baratheas with tartan neckbands, some in camel-coloured waistcoats, swinging their watch-chains, some in chocolate lounge suits with clocked silk socks, some in fustian and some in patchwork, all waited for Faith. London, trembling coyly with quick apprehension (the vigilance committee being somnolent in such weather, for who could stir, let alone penetrate, within the meaning of the Act?) quickened beneath the traffic in her bosom. Mouthing and muttering, the swains matched their skill in reciting her praises. Even Corydon was dumb. One had a musical instrument, a tuneful nymph, confined and complaining, whose voice reached the sleeping ears of grandmothers, taking their afternoon nap in rooms furnished in the Empire style.

But Jaques was the one whom all acclaimed, it was he who took his place in the shadow of the lamp-post, whilst the other goatherds stretched and waited round, and sang in joy. Melodious, oh melodious his voice to the very rooftops, and even the grandmothers clapped their hands, and ordered early tea with lemon and sugar. When he had finished, some tried to offer him money as a mark of their appreciation. But Jaques sang for joy and love; he

was no hired ballad-monger. They retired abashed, who had waited on him.

As the afternoon passed, and the shop assistants grew humid with sweat, so the swains waited for Faith. She, the art critic, mystic, acolyte, worshipped within, rapt in strange rites. Jaques and his band were content to sit in the shade, passing the time with songs and revelry, matching their skill in the time-honoured fashion. What though their feet were in the gutter? London, fair London, owned them for her own, gave them shade when they were heated, refreshment when they thirsted, and provided for their natures, all from the rates and taxes. Improvident, feckless and extravagant, the gods loved them, and they knew it. So now they sauntered and laughed on the smoking pavements, waiting for her to come to whom they addressed their verses.

O delicate shepherdess, whom I saw in the water-
gardens,

Sailing thy skiff in geranium seas,

Guided by Providence, to whom I make sacri-
fice,

(I poured a libation, God, for Thy doings),

Dally with me in the shade of the side-streets,

Gathering wild flowers from broken buildings;

Let us play catch-me in the scented evenings,

Crowning our love in patient alley-ways.

Thus sang Jaques, swaying with lust on the impassioned kerb. Coins clanked in his pocket as he waited for his sweetheart. The sun caught him in dusty windows, and threw back his countenance, twitching with tenderness. The sweating shop assistants, unlovely in marocaine, watched with heavy jealousy. Their squat fingers,

orange with nicotine, ached for kisses. Not for them did Jaques wait on the pavement.

The heat lay like a blanket, clogging the breath. The thick air had settled on the streets like a sediment, turgid, suffocating. Those who walked, however slowly, caused sullen eddies to form at their feet, dragging their steps as though they were in a quicksand. Their grey cheeks hung with the effort of movement. London was distorted through their opaque eyeballs; only Jaques, guardian of the gutters, seemed real. He swung above them, looming through the atmosphere, winking with impassive lasciviousness, as a dog winks impassively at the fire. He stood in front of the shop-windows, appraising the faded goods within. Jaques, dilettante, connoisseur, paused in the shade of candy-striped blinds, taking stock. Behind the tired rolls of cloth, pallid faces floated like fish, their unwinking eyes stretched with apprehension. Superimposed upon their features, vapid with heat and fear, Jaques himself dangled in grandeur. In the reflection of the shop window, he carried window-boxes on his shoulders, and a shop-door under his armpit. Through the door could be seen only a pit, a pit of indistinct greyness, in which vague shapes assumed and put off meaning, as clouds assume and put off meaning. In its depth a number of pale objects fluttered; now they were there, now gone. Now they reappeared, only larger and paler. They took on form, they were approaching the doorway. Jaques swung round in time to see Faith framed in the doorway.

The atmosphere of the street had become electrified in an instant. All eyes pierced the spot, and a murmur hung in the throats of the swains. All eyes looked to Jaques.

Jaques fixed his twitching stare upon her, upon his

sweetheart as she stood in the doorway, blinking in the sudden sunlight. His twisted foot swung noiselessly, gently to and fro. His great arms dangled loosely by his side. Like a lion come suddenly upon his prey, he made no attempt at concealment, knowing that his movement would lose more than hiding might gain. Thus he stood and watched and waited.

Faith had slipped by the pair in the gallery shop without their showing any signs of having noticed her. Madame's pleading self-deprecation echoed behind her. She felt outraged at this betrayal of femininity, almost as though she had been forced to see herself attempt some degrading task. On the threshold of the shop she paused. The sunlight was like a wall into which she had walked. Stunned, she could for the moment see nothing. Then, as the world filtered in through her dancing eyeballs, she became aware that she was being watched. Jaques, limp and motionless in the striped shadow of the blind, fixed his stare upon her with the single-purposed intensity of an animal. She saw only his eyes. They shone out of the dark of his face with a lust so fierce, so primitive, that the force of it paralysed her thought. Her mouth went suddenly dry. And almost at the same instant, her mind took in the whole situation, the fetid street, the dusty shops, and Jaques, his ill-kempt, unlovely form. Before she could control herself, taut with the fury of vicarious humiliation, she returned him an angry baleful look, so that her eyes shone, and the whites flashed. For a moment she gave herself up to the ecstasy of fury, and then, recollecting where she was, and what she was at, she turned on her heel imperiously, and started off down Brook Street at a tremendous pace.

Nothing had escaped Jaques. He had seen her primitive terror, her growing awareness and her fury. As she suddenly turned and set off towards Bond Street, a grunt had escaped him, as though this had confirmed some expectation of her behaviour he had been formulating, and pausing only to survey briefly the field of his triumph, he launched himself in the same direction. The swains had departed, aware that Jaques would brook no competition. They had receded like the wave at low tide. Now that Jaques was gone too, only the shop assistants were left, vacuous in the gloom of their porticoes.

Bond Street was two sluggish rivers of people, slowly moving, impeded by every obstacle. The merciless heat had found them out, as rats are smoked out of a dry-saltery. Some ran aimlessly this way and that, seeking to escape the sharp sunlight. The majority, however, blindly followed those in front, seeing nothing, hearing nothing and smelling nothing but the movements of their leaders. They gave no sign of seeing anything, although they occasionally looked in the windows of the shops as they passed. There all the impedimenta of excess luxury were laid out, unashamedly, on shelves and stands. Nothing was cheap, nothing was undecorated, nothing was useful. In these windows lay the materialized evocations of the aims of life, here lay the essence of civilization. For these knick-knacks millions ground their days fine with labour, moving from cash book to cash book. The crowd passed them by, seeking another salvation. But the shops farther on carried the same goods, as did those farther on still. The heavy footsteps were silent in the thick dust that lay on the pavement, and the crowd shuffled anxiously along, pushing those in front, patiently pushed by those behind.

Faith could think of nothing but the scene she had just witnessed between the gallery proprietress and her assistant. His insolent expression, the way in which he shrugged his shoulders as though he were not really interested, the disdain with which he flicked through the pages of some folio, with his eyebrows slightly raised, and a patient supercilious look on his face, all this was too much to be borne. The blood rushed into her neck as she thought of it; she thrust people to one side in order to pass them, and it did not need her beauty to divide those before her. She swept between them like an angry queen. But soon even her regal progress was forced to slow down. The shock of her impetus was absorbed by the plodding backs of the slow shop gazers. Pushing aside one only brought another into view. To abandon herself to the slow movement of the crowd was all she could do.

As she passed them, Faith glanced idly in the shop windows. The goods, though beautifully wrought, seemed to her so dusty, so incongruous with age, that it was inconceivable that any should ever be sold. A curtain of unreality hung over Bond Street. It lived in the eighteenth century, as though life consisted only of taking coffee and buying elaborate geegaws. It seemed to her apt that it should have become the home of pimps; that the goods sold most among the mincing crowds were not displayed in the windows. She looked in the milliners she was passing. There were only three hats displayed. Two in the well of the window were nondescript mediocre arrangements of felt and feather. But there was a tiny hand-stitched cap of white leather at the side, perched on a little shelf, that had such an air of *joie de vivre*, that Faith half wondered whether to go in and try it on. A

leather loop stuck out jauntily from its crown. It was almost too absurd to wear. Pressed closer to the window by the throng that had accumulated behind her, she saw with disappointment that it had a leather bow sewn on one side, a tasteless addition she had not noticed before. At the same time, reflected in the mirror backing the shelf, violent between the passers-by, she saw Jaques. His face, shrunk by the mirror to a doll-like attachment, bobbed gaily over the leather hat as though it were attached by a wire, the vision of some too fantastic designer. All at once what had been disconnected and unassociated images in her mind, the glad surge into the gutter, his staring face, the vague shuffling figure outside the Roumanian, splendid in the heat, and the savage, lustful glare from the shadow of the candy-striped blind, came together in her mind. The notion, once it was formulated, became ridiculous. By some strange coincidence, they had happened to be walking down the same street on two occasions. In fact, it was hardly a coincidence, since the streets themselves were not out of the way. Naturally he had stared at her. She would have been affronted had she thought that he would do otherwise. She felt almost affectionate towards this ragged fellow, like a great dog, who regarded her so longingly. For the Lord gave us eyes to see and minds to lust with, and only the eunuch need not know joy.

In thinking about him Faith had forgotten his presence, and a sudden surge of the crowd stirred her thoughts. The mirror behind the hat reflected only the gaping faces of the blind populace; Jaques's jerking features had disappeared. She glanced round, a little

apprehensively, half expecting to recoil from his face at her shoulder. He was not to be seen.

To her surprise she found that she had been holding the strings of her canvas bag so tightly that the palms of her gloves were soaked in sweat. What nonsense. The episode was hardly worth a thought; on the contrary, it would make a charming story, introduced at the right moment, with just that air of casualness. Perhaps not to David, no, certainly not to David, but to someone like, say, Celia. Yes, Celia, with her rich experience of *le sport d'amour*, she would appreciate such an episode. 'My dear, I met such a *droll* fellow the other day . . . in the gutter, my dear, so *primitive*.' And Celia's appreciative chuckle: 'No, Faith!'

She half turned to cross the road, still caught in her fantasy, when some fine instinct stopped her. She started trembling involuntarily, and it was with a considerable effort that she forced herself to look up. Not more than a few yards away, his eyes gleaming, Jaques was borne, ineffably joyous, on the crest of a pedestrian wave. His salt locks shone in the sunshine; his strange smile floated towards her over the heads of those who bore him so gladly. No palanquined monarch advanced one half so royally as Jaques, coming upon his lady-love. Bravely he moved towards her, his face twitching with passion.

Faith remained motionless for an instant, while the buildings swayed around her. Then, thrusting back the cry that had bubbled to her lips, she turned and started running. She was surprised that it was so easy. Her feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. Astonished faces swam in and out of her range of vision as fish pass a submarine window. And where beforehand it had been so

difficult to move forward at all, now it became supremely easy. The very fact of her running made the crowd, stupid with the heat though they were, part before her. Her feet drummed on the flags like a startled rabbit's, and the sound was swallowed up among the passers-by. She thought only of the fact of her running, and of the feeling of unreality it produced. She had at one stroke severed the bond that held her to these slow, fish-like creatures that had become now remote, even unlikely. She was conscious of them as she passed, but only as vague, undifferentiated shapes. Now that they no longer impeded her, the hostility she had felt towards them vanished. Her lithe steps rang out and startled sleeping pigeons, huddling dejectedly in bombed site shadows. A sense of well-being invaded her; she had ceased to think why she was running at all. Shops moved past her, but she would not have been surprised had she remained still, like Alice. The very fact of her running was a sufficient end in itself.

She stopped as suddenly as she had started. The world, which had been so remote and ethereal, acquired solid reality as she did so. The street, above which she had leapt so lithely, now closed in on her. The passers-by looked as startled when she stopped as they had done when she started. They surged round her, mutely clamorous, with demure but curious glances. She felt hot and faint, and there was some insistent question pounding at the back of her mind. It was ridiculous not to be able to think calmly, but just for the moment . . . there was something . . .

'Are you all right, Miss?'

A reedy voice broke in on her thoughts, and she forced herself to come to terms with the present.

‘Oh, yes, thank you. Yes, I’m all right.’

She smiled on the speaker, and started walking quietly towards Piccadilly. It was as though she had just woken from a drugged sleep. She had had some dream, something that was very important, but which she could not quite recall. She became aware of a knocking at her elbow. If she could only just remember a clue, she would get it all. The knocking was repeated. She was sure that it would come to her any moment. Again the knocking. Exasperated, Faith looked down, through the window, into a pale face which was peering up at her, and beckoning.

‘Celia!’ cried Faith.

CHAPTER EIGHT

‘MY DEAR, WHAT HAD COME OVER YOU? Here was I banging like a maniac on the window, for literally five minutes. Even that dear woman over there, with that extraordinary bird-cage device on her head, was beginning to look askance. And so unlike you, dear.’

Celia’s wide smile was welcoming, but her hard round eyes searched Faith’s face as she sat down, flickering from detail to detail like a snake’s tongue.

‘Celia—it is nice to see you. Yes, I’m sorry—I can’t think what came over me. I was dreaming.’

‘But darling, you must be sickening for someone. And after all these years, too. For shame, dear. You shake my trust in human nature. Some more tea, Miss. And be a dear and find us some really sick-making pastries, will you? I’m on one of my *je m’en fiche* diets, my dear. Such a relief to give way completely. I mean, it’s inhibitions and frustrations that puts on the bulges, isn’t it, darling?’

‘Celia, dear, you know you always look attractive, whatever you eat.’

‘Thank you, darling—I knew I could rely on you. But then you can afford to be magnanimous, with your figure. How nice it is, not to fight like cats. Faith, darling, I always adore talking to you, you bring out the best in me. Not like that creepy bitch, Noreen Saltford, who I had coffee with this morning. I said, but only to anticipate the cat, “I’ve put on exactly twenty-three ounces since I saw

you last, dear," and she replied, "We all like you so much Celia, *honey*—you know how she says that 'honey', like scraping your finger-nail on the table—we all like you so much, Celia, *honey*, that we can't have too much of you." The *dear* creature. You know she's such an extraordinary shape that she has to have her falsies made specially for her, in Paris. Quite what they must think they're for in the shop, I can't imagine. Pugilists' earmuffs, or something. That blue always did become you, darling. How heavenly it must be to look nice in something so obviously expensive.'

Celia's voice enveloped Faith like a well-worn jacket, and she allowed herself to relax in the comforting familiarity of her flow of affection and abuse. Her nervous tension slipped away, leaving her exhausted but comfortable. The woman with the extraordinary hat was gazing carefully at the cakes displayed on the trolley, but Faith could feel her fascinated concentration on the flow of scandal with which Celia was luxuriously regaling her.

' . . . ran into Fred and Sally at that dreadful Freeland party. My dear, I thought it was an all-time low, and she had the nerve to bring her lover and introduce him to everyone as an architect, who was redesigning her flat. Not that it isn't quite the most squalid place I know outside the *Ladies* on Paddington Station, but you know how she revels in dirt, and trots out all that stuff about the Swedish and the Swiss having scrubbed their culture away. So she just never cleans the place, stands a few giant cacti about, and calls it contemporary! The lover was quite loathsome, dear. Rather like you might imagine the man that works the projector in a cinema might be. Pasty-faced, with pebble glasses and a hand-painted

tie. I mean, darling, only Mary Freeland would have the appalling lack of taste to go to bed with such a creature, let alone to parade him. Oh, thank you, Miss. They take their time here, don't they? You pour, Faith dear, it makes me feel so maternal. And so I said to Fred and Sally, "My dears, you simply can't stay here." After all, Fred is an artist, and with these creative people you can't take risks. So I managed to persuade them to come with me to see Diana's new boat . . . '

Her voice wheeled on, soothing and calming Faith, restoring her to the world she knew, that comforting, friendly, adoring world, out of the security of which she had so suddenly found herself wrenched. The faces of her friends rose before her, smiled at her, nodded at her, their hands reached out affectionately as Celia pronounced their names.

' . . . whom Estelle met at a life class. My dear, such a piece! Rudolf Waldo—did you ever hear such a delicious name?'

'I must say it sounds phoney to me.'

'It's an old Peruvian name—goes back for centuries. His family trace their descent from the Incas or Aztecs or something, and he says they have a grand hereditary right to the whole of Peru and most of Bolivia. But they're all as poor as church-mice now, poor dears. But quite splendid about it. Apparently the family tradition has always been that the eldest son should never turn his hand to profit. And so, although he's frantically talented, poor Rudolf isn't allowed to work, and he does sculpture to give himself something to do. My dear, his carvings are really something out of this world—his flat is full of the most heavenly objects, so obscene, darling, it isn't true.

But the poor dear is desperately hard put to it to find the money to pay for his marble. You've no idea what a piece of stone costs, Faith.'

'Celia, I hope you're not giving him money.'

'Of course I am, darling. Don't be tiresome and old-fashioned. I can't just stand about and watch him get a complex or something. And it seems that there is an old Peruvian custom that the men are allowed to accept gifts from the women without injuring their honour at all. My dear, you simply must come over and see the flat. At least, perhaps not, darling. Oh, Faith, what am I going to do?'

'Celia my dear, what has happened?'

'It's Rudolf. He just stood me up.'

'Stood you up?'

'Yes. Humiliating isn't the word. And we were getting on so well, too. Oh Lord, why do these things have to happen to me?'

'But you weren't in love with him, were you, Celia?'

'Of course not, darling. Don't be absurd. But he is so nice, you can't imagine, and we had such delicious times together.'

'But I thought you believed in holding out after the first time.'

'Yes, I did say that, didn't I? But then it would have been so churlish to refuse him. He's been so kind to me, and people are so rarely kind to me, Faith. Oh dear, I'm getting maudlin. Darling, I really must fly. I have a hundred and one things to do. It's been so delightful seeing you.'

'You make it sound as though we lived at the ends of the earth, instead of about two miles apart.'

'Darling, I know I've been neglecting you lately. I'm

really very rude, I know. But then I've been so tied up with this dreadful man. I can't help feeling that something's happened, and he's had an accident.'

'Well, why don't you ring up and find out?'

'That's just it, that's what I did do. And some pussy-voiced female answered, and said he was out.'

'My dear, that sounds a bit conclusive.'

'I know, I know. But I can't really believe it. After all, it might have been the housekeeper or something.'

'What time did you ring?'

'Yes, I know. Late at night. But people do work late, you know. I'm being a fool, aren't I. You know, Faith, you just don't realize how lucky you are. Sometimes I think . . . my dear, there's an extraordinary man looking at us through the window. He's been there for some time—I've been watching him. I thought he was selling matches, or something. But I do believe he's trying to make eyes at me. What an incredible piece—he's making the most dreadful grimaces. My God, Faith, he's winking at me! Good Lord, whatever shall I do? Why don't you look at him? No, don't, don't look! He'll know we're talking about him.'

'Celia, do calm down. It's not you he's staring at.'

'Not me. What do you mean? How do you know, you've not even looked at him? Well, there's conceit, I must say. My dear, he's positively decrepit. Faith, you don't know him, do you? For heaven's sake, what is all this?'

'Celia, it's only an old tramp, who for some inconceivable reason followed me here down Bond Street. I thought he had gone away. He's got a broken leg, or something.'

‘Yes, that’s right—I can see it.’

‘Don’t stare at him, you’ll only encourage him further.’

‘It’s all right, I’m not staring, he can’t see I’m looking. He has got something wrong with his leg, too. But Faith, he’s incredibly dirty; he’s a vagrant, or something.’

‘I don’t know what he is, or care. I only wish he’d go away.’

‘But how exciting, darling! Does this often happen to you? I mean, what am I missing? And how on earth did it start?’

‘I can’t see that there’s anything exciting about being followed by a revolting old tramp half across London. If you find it exciting, then you must be a nymphomaniac.’

‘Darling, we’re being a bit snappy, aren’t we?’

‘I’m sorry, Celia, only it really is the limit.’

‘Why don’t you call a policeman if he’s bothering you?’

‘How can I do that? I’d look such a fool. And anyway, I can deal with him quite easily. After all, he won’t follow me in a taxi. But it’s exasperating enough if you can’t walk about without being followed by that.’

‘You’re being a bit hard on him, aren’t you, darling? I mean, I can see he’s a bit scruffy, but he’s got a simply marvellous figure. Has he said anything to you?’

‘No, of course not. And I do wish you wouldn’t keep looking at him, Celia. I’m sure he’d go away if we ignored him. If you’re so taken with him, why don’t you go out and seduce him as well?’

‘Faith!’

‘Well, for goodness sake! I try to get rid of him, and then you only make it worse by attracting his attention, so that everyone can see we’re talking about him.’

‘Oh, Faith, you’re being absurd. Making such a fuss about an old tramp. I don’t think he followed you at all. What has come over you this afternoon?’

‘Nothing’s come over me. It’s you who are so excitable that you can’t sit still without ogling that disgusting creature. Why can’t you leave him alone?’

‘I think I’d better go, dear. I’ll pay at the desk. Give my love to David, darling.’

CHAPTER NINE

OUTSIDE ON THE CRUSTED PAVEMENT, Jaques kept his vigil. His fearless hair hung about his head, and he gazed upon the passing crowd with tender pity. How could they know joy, who waited not for Faith? What had they to live for, who knew not the fever of anticipation? For their part they shuffled past, uneasily aware of their shortcomings. Clutching their sixpenny horoscopes, they blinked in the strong sunlight. But Jaques, noble suppliant, was purged in the fire of suffering. The war-prayer of his ancestors hung on his lips; his cracked face was lifted in ecstasy.

His visage hung with terrible delight, Jaques swayed in the gutter, chanting his worship. Those in the bustle touched his garments as they passed, and went on rejoicing. Them he did not heed. His strength lay in his joy, not in himself alone. His passioned face vibrated in the late afternoon; his clubbed fingers twitched with longing.

Faith sat in the focus of his gaze, her features drawn by annoyance into those of one of Giotto's street women. Framed by the tea-shop window, she bewailed the fractured Christ. No connoisseur more eager than Jaques to handle the object of his desire; no expert more discriminating in his appraisal. The palm-day gallery-goers hurried past without seeing the masterpiece in their search for the asterisked items in their catalogues. But

even these had gone for cleaning or, for some other reason, were not available. Sullen and disconsolate, they went home to high tea. Only Jaques remained, encorcelled by the glowing colours and serene confidence of the composition. His eyes probed it unwaveringly, as if to extract every atom of aesthetic virtue from its example, and the intensity of his appreciation was reflected in the quivering of his limbs and countenance; a quivering that was spasmodic, and came and went as his eye lighted on each new proof of the artist's genius. Jaques was none of those dilettantes who examine a work of art from the safe detachment of emotional distance; into whose consciousness the poignant message flows only to be picked over, and as soon forgotten; with whom art is at best a Saturday afternoon affair, with tea and water-ices in the park afterwards, and perhaps a stroll by the Serpentine; who put on their critical self as easily as they would an old jacket, and as easily put it off again. Their gossamer flutterings he would have despised, as he would have despised their persons. For him art was more than a spasm; it was a pulse of living. He approached a picture as if he were going to a lover; his skin started with sweat and tingled with apprehension; the blood rose insistently to his head, and laid a filigree over the yellow of his eyes; already trysting phrases babbled gently over his dried-up lips. It was as though he tried to establish contact with an artist by becoming part of the picture, by incorporating himself within it, so that where before there had been only a subject expressed in the curious inter-relationship of pigmented canvas, now there was a wholly new human situation. The art of painting was lifted on to a new level; it became alive, timeful and therefore variable.

By scooping the colours on to his personality, as on to a piece of silk, Jaques was able to alter their relationship. The image on the fluttering silk was never still, and neither was the art impressed on Jaques's mind. Faith moved and stirred under his inspection. Her metamorphosis was that of a river-picture of trees. Decorous in green leaf, they lie stilly on the surface of the water. But the summer winds reticulate their modest forms; they sway and dance a frenzied *schottische*, until in the quietude of autumn they are seen to have shed their clothes in their hectic abandon, and are now revealed in all their shameless nakedness. In just such a way did Faith discard her summer clothing until her white breasts swung freely over the stained tablecloth. Shivering with aesthetic delight, Jaques marked the faint tracery of veins that radiated from her freckled nipples; the long valley of her arched back; the roundness of her supple knees, that lay in the shadow of the table.

Faith frowned at the plates. She was annoyed with herself for having given way to such a childish fit of temper with Celia, and yet she could in no way dissipate her anger. She felt that Celia had deliberately encouraged the tramp, partly out of a curious perverted envy, and partly out of that form of nymphomania, and there was no other name for it, that led her to run after every human male that came within her orbit, no matter how inappropriate or unsavoury. No doubt Celia was a very neurotic woman, with her succession of husbands and her even longer succession of lovers; no doubt she ought to sympathize with her emotional difficulties, the endless scenes she provoked and the humiliating snubs she received, but she could not help feeling that the former were as

deliberate as the latter were well-merited. After all, if everyone were to give way to their emotions so easily, social relationships would quickly become impossible.

Faith moved in her chair irritably, and put her hand on the teapot. It was cold. She attracted the attention of the waitress and ordered fresh tea.

‘We close at half-past five, Madam.’

‘But you won’t take a quarter of an hour to get me a pot of tea, will you?’ she said sharply.

‘No, Madam.’

The girl collected the plates and cups, and straightened out a few wrinkles.

‘Will there be anything else, Madam?’

‘No, nothing else.’

Faith waved her away, and looked round the room. By now only one other table was occupied; a young, badly-dressed couple conversed at it in a low tone. The urgency of their conversation floated across the littered table tops, and the cashier pushed her bosom against the edge of the desk in her effort to catch what was said.

Celia, she reflected, seemed to have an instinct for disaster. There was that dreadful man, Robert Byng. And Max something or other. All Celia’s men seemed to have one thing in common. They were all what the Edwardians would have called cads. They belonged to a type, so that she really hardly changed her escort at all, but merely reappeared under a new guise. Perhaps it was natural enough that she should attract only the worst. This idea that all men liked women to take the initiative was simply not true. It may have been true of the twenties, when people really were working off steam. Perhaps Celia should have been born earlier. She would,

thought Faith, have quickly found a place among the emancipated women of that fearless period. One thing was certain, and that was that Celia was definitely out of place in the strained neurotic decade in which she now found herself.

The century, she reflected, was really rather like a human being; it grew up just as ineptly. The disciplined but feckless opening decade, with its mixture of asceticism and opulence, soon gave way to the introspective adolescence of the war years, when ideals flowered and fell almost as easily as human life. The irresponsibility of the twenties was followed by the frantic, weary thirties, when the century came face to face with reality for the first time. For the war was idealized and glorified into a chocolate-box fantasy, until it became the most natural thing in the world for youths of eighteen to die tangled deaths with 'Floreat Etona' on their lips. But the grey pall of the depression had put wrinkles round the eyes of the century, and it limped into middle age prematurely old. It seemed almost natural that a second war should have to have been fought, and this time without idealistic slogans. Nor could any respite be expected during the difficult years, the years when the crushed century sought relief from the effects of its dissolute youth. And it lay on the analyst's couch, full of ineffectual self-pity.

Faith's soliloquy was interrupted by the arrival of the waitress with fresh tea.

'Can I give you your check now, Madam? There wasn't anything else, was there?'

Impatient, tea-stained creature.

'No,' said Faith wearily. The damp steam clung to her fingers.

‘Would you pay at the . . . oh!’

The sudden exclamation rang through the room, and Faith looked involuntarily at where the waitress was staring. Standing on the pavement, not more than two feet away, and separated only by the dusty glass, was Jaques, his bloodshot eyes gleaming in the shadow of his brow.

‘Oh God!’ said Faith, getting up suddenly. She snatched the check out of the still transfixed waitress’s hand. Tea from the overturned cup spread slowly over the table.

‘Oh I beg your pardon, Madam, I do really. He gave me such a start.’

‘It doesn’t matter, you can clear away all that.’

The waitress followed her across the room, her thin voice clutching at Faith.

‘I’ll get you some more, Madam, it won’t take a minute, really it won’t.’

‘It doesn’t matter, I’d changed my mind.’

She thrust a ten shilling note down on the cashier’s desk, and strode angrily to the door. On the pavement she paused, and looked up and down the street. Her anger still sustained her, and she had almost thought to accost the tramp and report him to the police. But he was no longer to be seen anywhere. Only the homeward going were in the street, and the advance parties of twilight ladies, disdainfully sniffing the stale air.

Faith’s anger evaporated, and she suddenly felt tired and aimless. The day which had augured so well, was turning out badly. She turned into Piccadilly, and began to walk slowly towards Hyde Park Corner, past the travel agencies and the motor car showrooms, past flashy jewellers’ shops and unidentified couturiers, slowly walking towards the heart of the West End of London.

Jaques, the hunter, watched her from the doorway of a porcelain shop. The painted shepherdesses knew the game well. It was an old familiar story, as old as man himself, and they knew, too, how it would end. But their interest was as perennial as it was fatal; the same sad magic enthralled them as it had always done. Their miniature faces were shiny with excitement, and they exchanged brittle confidences on the probable outcome. Powdered wigs bobbed as the gossip flew, and not a few covert glances were made in Jaques's direction. He, for his part, was aloof from such women's tattle. For him, only Faith existed, and he watched the rhythm of her strong legs as she turned into Piccadilly and vanished from sight.

Where was Jaques? In amongst the heather,
Sporting with the milkmaids, there was Jaques.
Jaques, Jaques, your true love is leaving you,
Sporting with the milkmaids, in amongst the heather,
Playing kiss-me-quickly with blushing shepherdesses.

Where was Jaques? Has the fool not seen her?
Tripping through the bridlepaths, there was Jaques.
Jaques, Jaques, your true love is leaving you,
Tripping through the bridlepaths, has the fool not seen
her,
Playing kiss-me-quickly with blushing shepherdesses?

Where was Jaques? After her, after her,
After her swiftly, there was Jaques.
Jaques, Jaques, your true love is leaving you,
After her swiftly, let her not escape from you,
And no more kiss-me-quickly with blushing
shepherdesses.

As soon as Faith had disappeared, Jaques came from his hiding place, and started after her. He moved slowly but purposefully to the corner, from which he could see her head some twenty yards farther on, the sunlight glinting on her smooth black hair. Although the heat had eased perceptibly, and the light was not as strong as it had been, the closeness had increased, and the air about him moved uneasily, like water on the point of boiling. The evening rush had started; Piccadilly was alive with traffic, the pavements throbbing with the feet of returning heroes. But for all its near-hysterical bustle, the scene was strangely quiet, as though it lay under glass. The impatient hooting of taxi-drivers, the whine of gears changing, the practised chant of newsboys, all these were muffled and dispersed in the still air. It hung about them, as it did about the departing office-workers, cloaking their movements, and adding an ineffable weariness to their usual tense fixed expression. No one looked up. They bore the lashes of their punishment with resignation, almost with sorrowful enjoyment, not daring, or perhaps not desiring, to seek mercy. Only the blind look for God.

Thus the patient, weary, nervous throng shuffled down Piccadilly, clutching their briefcases. Only Jaques, the free, stood up and surveyed the scene, his flickering eyes ignoring the sleepwalkers. What had they to fear from him, whose briefest pleasure so far exceeded their timid joy? They to their loveless domestic women, embittered with children, their knees scarred with worship; they to their cheerless lovelorn homes. Jaques, the loved, heeded them not. Only Faith he saw, her radiant shoulders gleaming as she appeared for a moment, and then was lost again.

Who would not despise the briefcase men; who would not envy Jaques?

He started after her cautiously, keeping to the inside of the pavements, and using the shop entrances as coverts.

It was not, thought Faith, that one expects people to be continuously rational. After all, it is the eccentricities of one's friends that endear them to one. Character is a range of behaviour that lies between the dullness of sanity and the tediousness of lunacy. She did not blame Celia for her incredible lack of personal insight, severe though it was. Under the circumstances, it was impossible that she should have any degree of self-knowledge, for she would scarcely behave as she did otherwise. Nor was it her *maladroit* stupidity that was so offensive, though, God knows, it was irritating enough. There are, though Faith, a great many people who behave in the most devastatingly stupid way, and yet, through sheer naïveté, get away with it. But Celia always seemed able to so orient her behaviour that it was visited with the most unfortunate possible results. It was as though she set out deliberately to make a fool of herself.

She took advantage of the traffic lights, and crossed to the other side of the street. She hesitated a moment by the bus stop, where a long queue had formed. She did not fancy the prospect of waiting with these tired patient cattle, and to get a taxi right back to Chelsea, seemed, for some sudden unaccountable reason, an unnecessary extravagance. She decided to walk, at least part of the way, and crossing Grosvenor Place, she turned down by St. George's, and made her way towards Belgrave Square.

Her movements had not been unwatched. Jaques, the black flames of his hair burning fiercely against the white

stones of the Artillery Memorial, was hot on her heels. A puissant hunter, this Jaques, with his lurching step and twitching face. See how blithely he marks her trim spoor, how patiently he waits on her trail. He has the patience of generations, whose prey is assured. But no virtue the less to Jaques, who had set his heart on trapping this gentle creature unharmed. How wisely he gave her her head, content to let her wear her fretting out, to let her come of her own accord to seeing the inevitability of the catch, and the futility of striving against it. Better a weary pigeon than a bruised one. Besides, Jaques was in no great hurry. He had eternity on his hands, and his eventual delight would be the greater for its postponement. Secure in surety, he followed her cautiously into Belgrave Square.

The bustle of traffic was lost behind them. In the square a heavy silence reigned; even the birds were too limp with the heat to sing. The children had been taken in for supper; behind the impassive façades, old gentlemen in stained waistcoats played endless games of patience.

And now, thought Faith, another affair, indistinguishable from the others except that it is a Peruvian instead of a Central European, or the friend of a friend of a cabinet minister. She had only to see some unfamiliar male, and the whole process was set off, like some complicated piece of machinery. Look how badly she had behaved in the restaurant just then, as good as encouraging that disgusting old tramp to come up and stare through the window. It was not as though Faith herself had not had sufficient trouble with the wretched creature, following her all down Bond Street, with that revolting leer on his face, that Celia must make it worse by as good

as inviting him in. And then that in Coventry Street, oh, it was incredible. It must have been her imagination, he could not really have been pissing in the gutter.

Faith, with a horrified fascination, remembered the brave flow as it swirled down the gutter. That she could imagine such a thing was unthinkable, even more unthinkable than that it could have happened.

Coming to the end of Chesham Place, a fork confronted her. She started down Lyall Street, her mind still striving to come to terms with the incident, to arrange it in some hierarchy of unlikelihood, so that she could the better deal with it. But it was useless. Try as she might, she could only re-create before her electrified thoughts the powerful surge and his tense, staring face, twitching with joy. She suddenly realized that she was walking in the wrong direction, and crossing Lyall Street, she took the other fork.

As soon as she had turned out of Chesham Place, Jaques had increased his pace, urging his clumsy body along. His ankle clicked and creaked with the effort he was making, but his features remained composed and serene. Having seen her turn into Lyall Street, he did not pause to look about him when he reached the corner, but lurched down after her. She was nowhere in sight. She was walking faster than he had allowed for. The flagstones squeaked under his boots; the swaying air divided before him. Jaques the hunter in royal haste, his bold face gleaming in the evening sunshine.

Walking down the two sides of a triangle of roads, they both paused as they arrived in Eaton Square. They saw one another simultaneously. Jaques, stationary by the corner, his eyes fiery, watched and waited.

‘Oh God, mustn’t run, mustn’t panic, mustn’t run, calm, must not run, and that look, swinging his leg, keep calm, walk quietly, steady, steady, quietly, he knew, and that look, mustn’t run, keep calm, steady. Is he coming? Walk, quietly, quickly, quietly, is he coming? Mud and water, trees, mud, like a battlefield, mud, hiding, crawling, running, steady, at the front, drowned in the mud at Passchendaele, quietly, mustn’t, mustn’t run. By the pillar box, red, colour of blood, in the mud, on the sheets, mustn’t run, walk quietly. Is he coming? Quick look by the corner, no, mustn’t look, just a little look, no, quick . . . God, he’s coming, run, no, walking, run, you must not run, more quickly, prams and say, slowly, excuse me but, ridiculous, must keep on, no time, stupid women with your stupid prams, slowly, is he coming?’

The prim, newly-painted and repointed Georgian terraces smiled blandly down on Faith, hurrying down Cliveden Place. From their proportionate windows who knows who watched her frightened progress with dry amusement, counted her faltering steps and waited for Jaques to appear? Even the gods were holding their breath. The corner of the road shone with a fierce brightness, the arc-lamps hummed, and the great audience sat in bated silence, waiting for their hero. While they waited, they examined every detail of the set. On the backcloth were painted the battlefields of Eaton Square; stark and withered, the shattered trunks of trees brooded over the churned mud. Empty hollowed houses gaped stupidly; in their depths cats trod mincingly across the debris. Stagehands wheeled prams, or walked self-consciously about, seeking to draw attention to their latent art without arousing the director’s wrath. But after a few

moments these details ceased to interest the audience, and it was at this point, just when their tension was about to be relaxed, that Jaques appeared. He came on like the great troupier he was, suddenly, dramatically, without warning. One moment the corner stood empty, licked by light, silent, vacant; the next minute he was there, swaying slightly and blinking in the glare, but giving no indication of how he had arrived. The sudden gasp that went up was immediately succeeded by a tremendous ovation; people even stood and clapped to show their appreciation of this one piece of faultless acting. But the stern set of his features betrayed no emotion; his eyes were fixed unwaveringly on the agitated figure of Faith, as she hurried towards Sloane Square. Deliberately, purposefully, he started after her, thrusting his way past the outraged stagehands, his lurching steps clapping the stage with an insistent rhythm, like a jungle drum thumping irregularly across the tree tops.

‘Rubble and bricks, bombed lot, suddenly at tea, in the sunny afternoon, what time is it? Late, must hurry, but not run, there’s no hurry, *is he coming?* Quietly, walk quietly and poised, aching wrist and feet are hurting, but quietly across Sloane Square, like tombs, and the trees, and the sad sad trees, and Peter Jones, Peter Grimes, stomping, *is he coming?* What right, what right has he to interfere, find a policeman, a policeman, wait, safe here, but safe from what? *Is he coming?* Feet aching, hot, oh so hot and aching, a taxi, but there’s no time, can’t wait, no time to wait. *Is he coming?*’

Faith’s tripping steps tinkled among the tombs of Sloane Square. About here the populace ran hither and thither in their strange worship. The shops were shut,

but from their lighted windows promises of the world to come still glittered. The heat gripped the dusty pavements as relentlessly as ever. The sky had turned a thick daffodil yellow; it hung over London like a sagging balloon. In the street wisps of paper were suddenly picked up, spun round in the gutter and cast back, as though examined by some greater, invisible Jaques.

He, the healer, immaculate, tender, stood in the sunlight and watched Faith affectionately in her path across the square. He looked on her as gently and benignly as on a growing daughter, whose increasingly confident steps are both a joy and a sadness. No father more delicate, more fastidious in his caresses than Jaques. Strong in his love, he watched her with that mild possessiveness that is a shield against the terrors of the outside world. As she disappeared into King's Road, under the curving porch of Peter Jones, he started after her again.

'James Gregg, knife shop, the cutler, Mr. Gregg the cutler, may I have Mr. Blade the cutler? Knives, like bones, laid out in a fossil, fossilized knives, and shining in the window like M, and his eyes, watching the knives, and the child, whistling, and that whistling, God, what was it? And the ball rolled out, and it stopped. I must remember what that whistling was. Huggins and fruit, coloured fruit like toys, over the saucepans and mixing bowls, galvanized, and what was that whistling? Steady, Grieg, that's it, something out of Grieg. Eggs, sixpence, up again, and four to an omelette, that's two and four, no, two shillings to an omelette. Something by Grieg, like the Lyric Suite, but how does it go? Recruiting, no, and the guns, polished, beautiful, some would say beautiful, guns as an art form, conscious creation. *Is he coming?*

Trees, open, scrubby little park, under the trees, made love to me, and that block, like a mother, yearning stubby arms, amputated, like a thick, stupid, bleeding mother, but all in, no children, must be late. Come unto me, all ye that are weary, and go to him. Feet sore, aching, but home soon. *Is he coming?* Look, look to see, but no, home, old maps, in a book, old books and dusty, profitable, oh my feet, and the heat, it's going to burst, cloudburst in this oppressive, withered trees, and the dust, like an omen, Greeks would look upon sky as an omen, of what, of what? Markham Square, shabby Markham Square, with a home-made church, inside, and the smell of cheap candles, but not r.c. Little girl in that disgusting pinafore, and her nose dribbling, sniff it up, child, ought to be in, waiting at the Palace, cardboard, from a bad musical, like a lavatory, quietly, *is he coming?* Shops, Blindells, and the gay gifts at chez michel, home of, quickly, oh my feet. Garage, smell of oil, and pub, smell of beer, and over we go, across the street, and the town hall, grey, like a pudding, twice nightly, foot clinic, my feet, these shoes, but open places, steady, so hot, feet, down Oakley Street, and just look, quickly, quietly, just look, without, *is he coming?*'

Jaques, the lover, a-babbling gently to himself, watched his mistress turn down Oakley Street. As she did so she gave a quick glance over her shoulder. His great taut body was outlined against the turbulent background of King's Road. Brave he seemed, like a Celtic god, his twitching face enflamed with love, his nervous hands alive and throbbing. His tender eager gaze rested upon her, washing her body with its flame; his agitated lips, moist with anticipation spoke to her; his thick tangled

hair even was like a signal to her. He was love itself, advancing bravely towards her.

She turned and began to run down Oakley Street. On either side the weary terraced houses watched her impassively. The street was deserted. Ahead, the wires and rods of Albert Bridge loomed like a nightmare spider. The violent heat wrenched the pavement apart under her panic-stricken feet; the raw edges lay smoking. Behind her Jaques had started to run too. For every step with his twisted foot, he made two with his sound one, as if he were taking part in some curious obstacle race. His misshapen shadow pitched and lurched before him.

As she ran, Faith babbled quietly, like an idiot child. Her eyes were dilated with fear; she did not see the sullen beauty of the embankment wall in the torpid quietude of the evening. At the corner she stumbled and fell. She was up in an instant, and without looking round, ran on down Cheyne Walk. She had not cried out, and the thin trickle of blood that made its way down her torn elbow she did not seem to feel. Suddenly she stopped, and hung for a moment over a garden gate. It opened before her, and half running, half falling, she staggered to the brightly painted front door, pushed it open more with her body than her arm, and disappeared into the dark green well of the hall as a fish slides into the shelter of an overhanging rock.

Three

CHAPTER TEN

SWAYING the walls. stairs, HEAVING, under feet. (dirty marks on the paint, must get the bannisters cleaned.) clip clop, clip clop, CLIP CLOP. Smell, familiar smell, Clean. The telephone is in the bedroom, the telephone is in the lounge, the Telephone is in the bedroom, the Telephone is in the lounge, the TELEPHONE.

The Bedroom.

dark and familiar the gloom of the hall, dark the remote corners of the house, and dark the shadow, dark the shadow in the hall.

CLANGED the GATE? (did the gate clang?)

top stair, like a living thing, SWAYING, step on it, kill it dead. Treading on the dead stair, from the remorseless deep, the nymph, upsadaisy.

crying like a baby. like a baby.

Perhaps the Door opened?

Yes it did open. Probably.

Of course Celia would deal with the situation, Celia would be there, saying, come along, come along, come along.

The top stair, swaying like that, a new art form, top stairs as new art forms, discovery by critic.

tiptoe across the landing, TIPTOE across the hall. Over the shiny surface (which needs polishing). is there anyone there? Little Annette, pretty Annette, sweet darling Annette. IS THERE ANYONE THERE?

there is no one there.

Only the telephone in the bedroom, pink candlewick bedspread and off-white rug.

How quiet the house is, *quiet the house*.

The Telephone there by the bed, cream telephone (*matching the paintwork, an extra guinea*. But an absolute necessity, David said, an absolute, David.)

There is no one in the house, there is no one in the house, there is no one in the house, there is no one.

the TELEPHONE, lightly, quickly, pick her up gently. The number, the Number, the NUMBER.

trembling.

PIC 9567

The gate *had* clanged. The apprehensive sky looked down upon the Lover at the gate, watched HIS fumbling with the latch, heard HIS muttered impatience. Oh, how HE was wrapped about with glory, how the evening sun, already threatened by sullen clouds, lit up HIS hot cheeks. The latch felt the excitement of HIS sweating palms; the path the trembling of HIS feet. From the gate to the door but a short passage, past the mimosa, but Jaques lived and died a thousand deaths thereon. Oh, the dilated eyes of the Lover; HE can see only HIS sweetheart, timid on the naked couch. Hush, my little one, my milk-white darling, do not be afraid. But love is a fearful mystery; who can blame her for shivering? No one can blame her. But be patient, my gentle dove, be strong in your love, have faith in your lover. Brief and fierce the initiation, and then, great joy. So do not hide your breasts under suppliant wrists in such a fashion. Now HE has no doubt. The door opens before HIM. HE is not surprised. No one more

selfish, more arrogant, than a lover. The swaying stairs listen to HIS approaching step.

If not tonight, then tomorrow night, not hearing tonight doesn't signify, probably ring tomorrow, for tomorrow night, but perhaps tonight, surely tonight, ah, yes, tonight. That dress she was wearing today, and spilling the martini, but unconscious, yes an unconscious sign, must always be on the lookout, tonight or tomorrow night, but some show of resistance, for form's sake, no, no, Henry, no, but yes, really, yes, yes, Henry. 'The Editor, Paprika, Dear Sir, In his last letter my friend Dr. Jimner seems to imagine that the relationship between calvinism and the capitalist ethic is established for all time. I would refer him to my book, Freedom in Thrall, where on page 195 . . . ' Walking, how gently she walks, and eyes, those eyes, but looking, not looking, and protesting. 'No one, least of all myself, is attempting to deny the neurotic basis of Franklin's code, but Dr. Jimner must surely be joking when he says that I affirm . . . ' Her skin, gleaming in the firelight, but tonight, if not tonight, doesn't signify, then tomorrow night.

I am crying. Crying.

Silly.

Dial gently.

PIC 9567

Shoes pinching, off, just push off, just.

How quiet the house is, QUIET the house.

Henry answer, please, answer, PLEASE ANSWER
HENRY DARLING.

(Dust on the window-sill, Annette, dust and that red mark, from the varnish, must be a year ago, year ago.

Annette. David didn't like it, take it off, but David, be reasonable, take it off. David. DAVID. There is no one in the house, there is no one in the house, there is. No one. NO ONE.)

Brrr—brrr. Brrr—brrr. Brrr—brrr.
please make Henry ANSWER.
crying.

Jaques moved solemnly among the fragile bric-à-brac in the hall. HIS hair floated round HIS head as sea-anemones sway in rockpools. On the painted wood beside the stairs were hung framed plates from a seventeenth-century herbal. As HE started to ascend the stairs, HIS shoulder caught one of them, and it fell and broke. On the floor above, somebody started to scream.

Her shoulders, smelling of scent and sweat, very slightly of sweat, and the dress, rippling, tonight, but doesn't signify, if not tonight then tomorrow night.

It was Faith who was screaming. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her shoes off, holding the cream receiver in her hand, and screaming.

Oh, how the gods looked down. Bless you, my child. There, there, it will soon be over.

The telephone clicked, and she stopped at once.

'Henry, Henry? Is that you, HENRY?'

Yes, it was Henry.

Glorious, darling, beautiful Henry, my sweet, my knight, my rescuer.

'Henry, you must come round to me, quickly, now, please, quickly Henry, oh God!'

She put the receiver nervelessly down.

She knew that, she knew that, SHE KNEW THAT . . .
at the door.

WHO is it leaves the door ajar? Mr. Nobody. Mr.
Nobody. Mr. Nobody.

She did not look round.

*Tonight, tonight, oh, oh, tonight, get my, quick, soon,
in her room, tonight, shoes, shoes, damn, doesn't matter,
oh, taxi, taxi, tonight, TAXI, TAXI, TAXI.*

Jaques stood framed in the bedroom doorway. HIS great body was trembling with joyous anticipation; HIS eyes twitched and flashed in their sagging sockets; HIS mouth worked with unconcealed passion. Oh how bravely HIS hair seemed to burn the woodwork! Oh how HIS knotted fingers itched to press her white flesh! Oh how HIS cracked nostrils distended with the vigour of HIS breathing!

But Faith would not look round at her lover.

Dust. on the window-sill. Tell Annette, must tell Annette. (wash the paint down.)

Pink bedroom. Pink for girls, blue for boys. Wonder what became of that pink pyjama case. Aunt Ada's wedding present. Oh brave, brave new world.

(mustn't look)

Oh no, John, no, John, NO.

(Mustn't look)

MUSTN'T LOOK.

Taxi! Taxi! Taxi! Taxi!

They both waited. Outside, the cavernous sky yawned and cracked under the strain of the impending storm; for a moment the whole of London seemed to be paralysed with fear; the violet light flooded the roofs and chimneys, and the fearful faces of those who waited. Then, suddenly, a great flash lit the clouds, and almost at the same instant, the first thundercrash fell. Already the glow was fading, and already a few unpremeditated drops of heavy rain were falling on the ironwork of the bridge. The storm, which the whole day had yearned, had come at last.

With the first flash of lightning, Faith jerked her head round. Terror had so worked upon her mind that the sight of Jaques, aflame with passion, lurching towards her, was almost a relief. She stood up unsteadily to receive HIM.

For a moment her lips moved, and words of command formed on them. But looking up, she saw the tell-tale horns thrusting from between the matted hair, saw the prick shape of HIS great ears, and her voice died away. Fighting between faintness and terror, she snatched up an enamel-backed brush.

Dancing round, gay around, dance my darlings, drink my darlings, listen to your father's pipes, trilling on the chequered slopes.

HIS hands, HIS breath, HIS dribble, HIS scabbed skin.

Once, when I was very small, they took me into the woods to gather blackberries. I was very frightened. An ogre lives in the woods.

Crying again? What good will that do?

Heigh-ho, it has to happen sometime.

Darling.

'Women only understand one thing, an' that's a man as knows 'is own mind. Go right in, an' take what you want, an' don't 'esitate.'

The sudden appearance of *hauteur* in her face had caused HIM to pause. HIS crabbed hands opened and shut. HIS shiny gaze shifted. Then her voice tailed off, her assumed authority shrivelled up, and her primitive fear returned. HE was no longer in any doubt. As she picked up the brush, HE uttered a little growl, and threw HIM-SELF upon her, bearing her heavily down upon the bed.

Oh, darling, darling, Faith, on the bed, struggling, and her, TAXI, TAXI, taxi, TAXI.

The thunder was immediately overhead. The room shook with every peal. It had grown dark almost at once. All that could be seen of Jaques was HIS black silhouette, except for when the flashes threw HIS face into sudden light.

HE had fallen across her, pinning one arm with HIS hand. HIS weight pressed her into the coverlet. HE was tearing at her dress. In her free hand she still held the enamel-backed brush, and she beat frenziedly at HIS head with it, but the blows made no impression. Her mouth was open, her throat working as to scream, but no sound came. Only HIS heavy excited wheezing.

Oh, no, no, no.

Crying again.

Here we go round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush.

Creaking, the bed. The bed creaks. David, fastidious, must get the springs seen to. Simple operation, really. Nothing in it. A little oil where it rubs.

Lightning.

HIS lovely face.

And the thunder of HIS passion.

Lightning again.

In the flash, Faith saw the side of HIS head. Just above HIS ear, there was a bald patch in the hair—an oasis of white skin, rimmed by a crust of dirt and scurf. There was a sound of ripping linen. She dropped her brush, and started to struggle fiercely, silently, as a wild animal struggles.

Faith under me, struggling, gently, gently, darling, no, I won't hurt, no, Henry, but yes really, really yes, hurry, man, for God's sake, hurry, and her dress, struggling.

Oh, swaying room. Oh pink and white striped walls, closing in on me. Swaying, SWAYING. And the SWAYING lamp, and the spotted bulb SWAYING.

We have done those things which we ought not to have done.

Little lady, little lady.

Crying again?

Why struggle (what is there to struggle about?)

No, John, NO.

Love pretty lady, love pretty lady.

And the cobwebs, and the flashes of lightning, and His breath, hot in my face.

No, no, please, NO.

no

‘These satyrs are rough fellows—they are not like your drawing-room lovers. I do not think you would like their hard, slobbering mouths, their horny hands, their rough, hairy knees . . .’

Prying hands, curious hands, searching hands, hands that thrust, hands that bruise, hands that clutch and squeeze.

Oh bravely, Jaques, my lover.

The coarse fur of HIS thigh against her thin skin.

See how gently HE enfolds her, how HE coaxes her, persuades her, dallies with her. Oh, what a joyous lover it is!

Play, my little sweetling, play with your gentle lover.

Ride a cock horse, to Banbury Cross.

No, no.

Off with her dress and off with her petticoat.

(Stop struggling, you silly baby. Daddy won’t hurt you.)

Off with her vest and off with her knick-knicks.

No, no.

There’s a pretty baby! There she is, the little darling! What a pretty baby! Hush, there, hush. Oh, such a noise.

‘It is the ironical situation, is it not, Madame, that this free mind of ours spends most of its time in thinking about love, an attribute most obviously of the body, and in doing so ensures its own extinction.’

There, there, don’t cry. Nobody’s going to hurt you.
SWAYING the room.

SWAYING the dark shadows on the wall. To and fro,
TO AND FRO.

And the creaking bed.

(it's only a matter of a little oil in the right place)

Ride a cock horse, to Banbury Cross.

Stop crying, you little fool.

*And her struggling, no, no, Henry, yes, yes, Faith, but
pretending, really wants to, yes, really wants to, and me
touching her, touching, no, no, Henry, hurry, man, can't
you hurry, and soon, tonight, no Henry, yes, yes, yes, yes,
yes.*

Burning, HIS burning.

Oh, oh, oh.

Gently, Jaques, my brave lover, gently.

Gently in, gently out, gently.

Oh, oh, the swift moment. And the curtains stirring,
like black velvet against a deep blue night.

Blue-black the night, veined by lightning.

Oh softly, go softly.

David, the weak, the ineffectual lover.

No, no, no.

Clutching, COMING, clutching.

Bravely, my boy.

And the curtains.

Hands, GRASPING, joyful.

Men have such primitive ideas.

Fetid breath. And HIS rough clothing, scratching my
skin. And HIS horny scabbed lips, bruising my face. And
HIS angry thighs, banging, BANGING, BANGING.

Crying again?

Does the thunder frighten you then? Silly child, it's only a noise.

Only a noise, only a noise, ride a cock horse, it's only a noise.

Burning, HIS BURNING.

And David, gently, the limit, men, swaying, curtains, in the gutter, GUTTER, Henry, and my breasts, take me, the art critic, TAKE HER, the art critic, curtains, oh god no, rough fellow, hate it, hate IT, and THE mud, bombed, AND HURTING, (hurting), swaying, Like Circles on the WALL, blue for MIND AND RED (for lust), yes, and his HORNS, impaled, CRYING, no, nooo, Madame, Celia, banging on the window AND BANGING BANGING oh god, the hot, no, like fire, to banBURY CROSS, ohhhhhhh, rings and scaredy CAT Scaredy cat, on his fingers, ahhhh, and the MUSIC, men have SUCH prim-i-t-i-v-e ideas, oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhhhh-HHHHH the lilting,

oh the lilting
pattern on the quilting,
oh the sneaking
bedstead creaking
oh the prancing
shadows dancing,
listen to my heart entrancing,
beating, beating,
lovers' meeting,
to and fro,
the shadows go,
to and fro,
To and fro.

Quicker than death,
The movement from ecstasy to lassitude,
Follows the spark up the chimney to oblivion.
The protest comes from those who watch
The relentless dialectic of the flesh,
To and fro, coming and going . . .
*When I was young I used to watch the river-lights,
But now I have better things to do in the evenings.*

There is a way of coming peculiar to each,
And the practice bespeaks the pattern.
Self-conscious on the apprehensive bed
The Trio wait, eyeing my evening performance.
Society smirks as the lights go out,
And the tale is tossed about the branches.
The returning drunk mutters beneath the window,
And the night air, star-laden, creeps over the sill,
Bringing a scent of sweetness.
Here in the parched room my betelled breath
Disturbs the moonlight pattern on the ceiling,
Reflecting the broken clouds.

Four

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHLO'LY, BRAVE SHA'WES GO' UP fro' the be'n wal'ed
'wards'a door. 'sh bu'ns shtill undone, bu' di'n care, di'n
seem to care. Goo' ol' Sha'wes! There'sh'a tashi ou'shide
'n'man'n hurry, 'n runnin'n, 'n up shtairs, Bu' Sha'wes's
on shtairs alre'y, 'n kno'd thish shap arsh 'ver ti', f'r
ge'n'n 'sway. Bu' pi'd 'msel' up 'n ran 'n 'p shtairs.

One thin', shtop' rainin' outshide, tha'sh one thin'.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE MOON HAD RISEN by the time Jaques reached the embankment gardens. It laid a veil of snow over the benches and their sleeping occupants, so that they appeared as carved marble statues. Long-dead bishops, clutching their croziers piously in their sleeping hands, lay on the benches. Above them the fan-vaulted trees stirred noiselessly in the river-breeze, casting purple shadows like pools at their feet. Into this sacred sea Jaques stepped fearlessly. The bench that was his by divine right was already occupied by some naïve ecclesiastic. Without rancour he jerked the sleeping form on to the gravel, and lay down in his place. The frightened usurper slunk away into the glad night, whimpering softly. Jaques composed himself for sleep.

Overhead the stars came out, one by one, as the clouds passed over the horizon. It was going to be a mild, delicate night.

post coitum omne animal triste

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